

Potter & Clay

The potter and the clay: growing up as I did in Southern Baptist churches in Florida, New York and Missouri, this was one of the most familiar images to me of God's interaction with people. Just as God had formed the first man, Adam, out of clay (adama), making humans out of humus, so we should offer our lives to God to be completely remade as God would have us. I can't begin to tell you how many worship services I attended that began as ours did today with the choir or the congregation singing, "Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me... Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me..." When I was growing up, the lyrics were a little different: "Break me, melt me, mold me, fill me..." There was more of an emphasis on how we needed to change and less on what God did with us after we were changed. Many of those same services ended, as ours will today, with another "potter and clay" hymn. "Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way. Thou art the potter, I am the clay."

The lyrics of those hymns, the image of the potter and the clay and its interpretation as God working and reworking each individual human life, my life, to meet God's requirements are all so deeply embedded in me that it was a bit of a shock a few weeks ago to reread the 18th chapter of Jeremiah as I was making preliminary decisions about our worship schedule and my preaching. I was all set to dismiss this Old Testament reading as an overly familiar call to individual repentance when I realized that there is so much more that I, at least, had never heard nor considered in Jeremiah's visit to the potter's house. I discovered that I do want to look at the call to individual repentance but equally as important I want to consider this morning how the story of the potter and the clay impacts us collectively. As Christians and as citizens of the United States, we have become comfortable with identifying ourselves with "the New Israel." But what does it mean for us when God through Jeremiah asks, "Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done?" How can we think not just of ourselves but of the Church and our nation as clay in God's hand?

I think it's pretty easy for us, especially if we grew up in evangelical circles, to think of ourselves as that recalcitrant lump of clay needing to be reworked by our Maker after not turning out so well in the first place. God's call to Israel in this passage, "Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings," sounds like the template for many of the sermons I heard over the years, although fortunately most of them were delivered with great love. Perhaps that's why I became an instant fan of the group Santana and their first hit with Greg Rollie on vocals and keyboards. Do you know the one I mean? "You've got to change your evil ways, baby / Before I stop lovin' you..."

But joking aside, the call to each of us to repent of evil ways is at the heart of our Christian journey because all of us are, intentionally or not as Paul points out, prone to sin; prone to wander, as another familiar hymn puts it, prone to leave the God we love. Even when our intentions are pure, our fallenness, our broken natures, lead us to act selfishly, wound others even if only by omission. As we learn more about ourselves and others, as we see God more clearly, day by day, our lives are a continual process of turning away from that which is less than Godly, receiving God's never ending forgiveness, and striving each day to love God, our fellows and all of creation more fully and truly. It is the journey of discipleship, responding to Jesus' call to follow him.

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I've not spent much time in my preaching among you on the first part of this individual process. It seems to me that most people and especially most people who seek the weekly consolation of the Church are well aware of their failings, of their brokenness and of their sins. Generally, we are all more in need of reminders of God's love, God's mercy which is new every morning, of God's forgiveness which is still and always offered to us freely. The harsh realities of the world do a pretty good job of reminding us of our shortcomings. Still, it is well every now and then to be reminded that no matter how far we've come in our journey of discipleship that we still have a ways to go. It is still true that we are all sinners or, as that great Baptist preacher Will Campbell used to say, "We're all bastards but God loves us anyway."

We have focused instead here at Good Shepherd Baptist on God's love and how our proper response to that love is that we ourselves should love. Not, as Jesus taught, just those who are easy to love but our enemies, those who are hateful to us, those whom society has taught us to abhor. I can't tell you how much it resonated with me when Bernie Turner, Good Shepherd Baptist's first pastor, came and spoke at our 50th anniversary and reminded those of you who'd been here in those days that his perpetual exhortation was to "love everybody." That, it seems to me, is the core of following Jesus who loved everybody, even those he chastised; loved them enough to die for them.

That, in summary, is the familiar lesson drawn by modern Christians, or at least evangelicals in America, from the story of Jeremiah at the potter's house. But is that all that is in the passage? Is it even the focus of the pericope as Jeremiah's first audience would have understood it? As important as the idea of us each becoming clay in the hands of God has become to us individually, Jeremiah had something quite different in mind. The word of the Lord in verse 6 which we have taken so to heart was not delivered to an individual but to the House of Israel: "Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel." And should the collective nature of this message somehow continue to elude us, the following verses make it even clearer: "At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it... Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings." God is not here warning individuals to repent but a group, a tribe, a nation. How can we understand this in our own context?

One way to interpret this for our time is to hear this as a warning to the Church. The idea of the Church as the "new Israel" can be traced back to the New Testament, most clearly in the writings of Paul but also in those attributed to Peter and, more obliquely, to the teachings of Jesus himself. I have referred on many occasions to Paul's teaching in the Epistle to the Romans that Christians are branches grafted on to the olive tree that is Israel, God's chosen people. There is also Paul's assertion in his Epistle to the Galatians that "if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise," and his closing of that letter which refers to the faithful as "the Israel of God." Likewise, I Peter uses language meant to recall descriptions of Israel in the famous description of the Church in chapter 2: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people..." In this, the writers echo the actions and words of Jesus, who chose a group of twelve, seemingly to echo the twelve tribes of Israel, and told the parable of the wicked tenant in the vineyard who beat their landlord's servants and

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murdered his son: “What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others.” The place of the Jews, the “First Israel,” has risen and fallen in Christian theology over the centuries but the identification of the Church as the “new” or “true” Israel has been quite consistent.

Can we hear Jeremiah’s warning to Israel then as a warning to the Church? Does the earthly Body of Christ need to change its evil ways? Our personal experience and the headlines of the day tell us unequivocally that the Church in many ways is in great need of repentance and forgiveness. We are, after all, a human institution, no matter how holy our founding or our aims. When I was a young man in my late teens and early twenties, I found it easy to be disdainful of the institutional church. But one day, in my own meditations, I realized that the Church is indeed the figurative Body of Christ on earth and that when we last saw the literal body of Jesus on earth, he was battered, bloody and wounded. So it is for the Church. When viewed with a skeptical eye, we don’t look very good. We bear the wounds of human beings who live in this world. We have been beaten and we are drenched in blood, too often shed by our own hand. Yet still God promises to use us to change the world, that we will be and indeed already are part of the Kingdom, the Beloved Community.

Collectively, we have sins of which we need to repent. We must turn away from the evil which we have done and continue to do because there are those in need of the Good News we bear who will not hear it until we cleanse ourselves from the blood that besmirches us in their eyes. We must stop being conformed to the world and be transformed by the Holy Spirit. We must continue to quench theologically-excused hatreds, for example. We must raise up the ecumenical spirit which accepts our brothers and sisters in Christ even when their beliefs and ways of doing things are different from our own. We need to love each other, not only across denominational barriers but even more importantly across the newer intra-denominational barriers. Every time the newspapers carry stories of vicious arguments and lawsuits between “conservatives” and “liberals” of the same denomination, the witness of the Body of Christ is damaged; new spots of blood appear on our clothes and those to whom we would minister are repulsed. We must continue to work to bring Christians of different ethnicities and cultures together for worship and work. It has been too many years since Dr. King pointed out our national sin in that eleven o’clock Sunday is the most segregated hour of the week. We must expose and bring to judgment those false shepherds in the Church who prey on the lambs rather than feeding them, the ones who seduce the innocent or divert the sacrificial giving of the faithful for their own ends.

Ultimately, the Church must turn away, in these and other examples, from the quest for and improper use of power. God promises us power but not in the way that the world understands it. As the Body of Christ, we must seek the power of Christ, the power of love which heals and saves. Like Jesus, we are called collectively to reject the power of the world, the power of wealth and rule over others. It should matter less to us how many and large our buildings are, how much is in our endowment, how often we are invited to sit at the head table with the captains of industry and rulers of nations. What should matter to us is how many are being fed, how many are being welcomed, how many are being clothed, how many are being healed.

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We will not make these changes, in our time, through the efforts of the handful of men and women who have been entrusted with the leadership of denominational bodies and communions. The overwhelming evidence is that the influence of these judicatories is in deep decline. More and more pastors receive the directives of their denominational headquarters with a shrug. Fewer and fewer laypeople are even aware of the pronouncements of the policy-making councils or heads of their own denominations, let alone those of their neighbors. And more and more, especially in our country, churches are not even associating themselves with a traditional denomination, in part because the denominations have fewer and fewer resources to share.

No, the leadership of the Church now depends upon the movement of congregations, just like this one. As we model for the world what it means to be the Body of Christ and do so effectively, our witness will be echoed by others who see their integrity reinforced by ours. Good Shepherd Baptist Church, small as we are, has become a template for those who hear the call of Christ to house the homeless and to provide a place where each one can sit in their own garden. I still hear from representatives of congregations who want to know about our experience in realizing the dream of Shepherd's Garden. Just last week, I had a visit from an official of the Episcopal Church in the U.S., who is leading a focus on community gardens at churches to encourage the spread of the vision that you all have kept alive for over 30 years. If we are faithful to the vision that God has given us, we will be doing our part to lead and assist in the turning of the Body of Christ, the New Israel, to a fuller realization of the calling of God.

We must allow God to shape each one of us, to shape us as we live together as a congregation, to shape us as we come together with all other followers of Jesus to be the Body of Christ. But we must also remember that God spoke to the house of Israel not just as a people gathered in worship but also as a nation. We must remember that God judged the nation of Israel in their treatment of each other, in their treatment of immigrants, and in their relationships with other nations. In all of these aspects, the nation of Israel was found wanting. And we must remember that throughout the history of the European colonies that became the United States of America, there have been those who have claimed an identity for our nation as the "new Israel."

It began, in some cases, before the settlers even left home. As one group of Puritans prepared to set sail from Southampton, England, in 1630, their minister, John Cotton, preached to them from II Samuel 7:10: "Moreover I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own, and move no more." In Virginia, in 1613, Alexander Whitaker preached, "God hath opened this passage unto us and led us by the hand unto this work." In Massachusetts, John Winthrop's 1620 Scripturally-based assertion that "We shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us..." became even more famous after being adopted by a latter-day American Exceptionalist, Ronald Reagan. In later days, George Washington was referred to as the "American Joshua" and both Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin proposed versions of a Great Seal for the United States that featured depictions of the Children of Israel from the Book of Exodus.

But as surely as we remember those things and take pride in what our country has done and become and consider whether we are right to assume the mantle of Israel as the nation most blessed by God, we must also consider how, like so many before us, our nation has become spoiled in the potter's hand. After the initial blessings and struggles of the colonial period, we

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became a nation, an experiment in democracy heretofore untried on so large a scale. At the opening session of Lynnwood University on Thursday evening, Loren Simmonds reminded the attendees that Benjamin Franklin was questioned as he left the Constitutional Convention, “Well, Dr. Franklin, what do we have – a republic or a monarchy?” Said Franklin, “A republic, if you can keep it.” And, at one level, we have kept it. But even before we were officially a republic, the acts of empire crept into the American experience and the temptation to act as an empire continues to grow stronger and stronger.

Those same Puritans who saw the hand of God guiding them, for example, were quite stern in denying the freedoms that they sought to others. Our own spiritual forebear, Roger Williams, founder of the First Baptist Church in America, was expelled from Massachusetts in the middle of the winter for his unorthodox beliefs. The history of early Baptists in America is cluttered with those who were persecuted by the Puritans and other Christians. It is easy to slip into imperial behavior when you think God is on your side. And those same Puritans, abetted by their less rigid Anglican brethren and others, quickly found that it was easier to reap the wealth of God’s blessings when one dealt in or used the labor of black slaves, kidnapped from Africa. And then there was the treatment of the indigenous peoples of America, for which genocide is the only really appropriate term. Were these the actions of a true Israel of God?

Perhaps “imperial” is too strong a term for these actions. Still, we have gone from the call of President Washington, who urged against all foreign entanglements, to the famous doctrine of President Monroe, just 25 years later, which warned European powers away from the continents and waters of the Americas under the assumption that the U.S. would be responsible for the affairs of its neighbors. From then until now, it has been a relatively rapid movement, in historical terms, to the reality of the United States as the world’s policeman as practiced by presidents from Truman to Obama. We now find ourselves on the brink of attacks on Syria, which will kill thousands of Syrians, in order to punish the current regime of Syria, which has killed thousands of Syrians. Are these the actions of a nation that has the right to claim the title of the “true Israel of God?”

How do we repent for these and other sins, as a nation? How do we effect change? There is always, of course, the vote. That’s how democracies make change, ultimately. But I suggest that, as with change in the Church, we have another way to change our country into one being shaped by the Great Potter. We must take the opportunity to be involved in local government and policy-making. This is one of the reasons that I have been involved at the commission and council level in Lynnwood. I believe that people of faith must make their influence felt at the local level so that we can inspire and encourage other people of faith who have the ability and desire to serve at the state and national level. Just as in congregations, if we can move our cities towards a profile that closer resembles the Beloved Community, where economic and social justice for all persons is a priority, where the vulnerable are protected and fairness is encouraged, other cities will take heart and follow suit. From small acts of kindness and justice, a kinder and more just society can grow, as long as there are enough people faithful to God and God’s call to us.

Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way... Jesus prayed, “Not my will, Father, but thine be done.” It can be hard to be the clay in the hand of the potter. We must be willing to be

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broken, to be molded. But just as the potter works what seems like magic with a little water and a lump of earth on her spinning wheel, so does our Loving Creator work to transform us amid the whirl of life. We, too, can become beautiful vessels for God's love to fill and to use... and not just us, not just individual, recalcitrant, lumpy, dirty us, but this congregation and all of the Body of Christ and even, God willing, our promising, infuriating, warring, unjust, yet blessed nation. For the mercies of God, for the reshaping, beautifying work of the Potter, for the love of Christ and the companionship of the Holy Spirit, thanks be to God!