

Sermon – Jeremiah 18.1-11

13th Sunday after Pentecost

May the words of my mouth and meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. **Amen.**

It's Father's Day! A day of celebration and possibly mixed emotions for some people. Behind the celebrations of our Father's Day Breakfast, perhaps there are both happy feelings and some sad feelings. Perhaps relationships with fathers are not the best. Fathers themselves might feel that they could have done better. Perhaps some fathers are no longer with us and their absence, is keenly felt. The idealized picture of Father as God, is repeatedly expressed in scripture. And this ideal, is sadly not always the case in the human reality of family ups and downs. Our world is a wounded world, and it seems to me that there are many wounds being played out in families today, locally and globally.

Today we hear again from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah. Two weeks ago we heard about Jeremiah's call from God and we reflected on how God calls each and every one of us into roles that serve our communities. Last week, Revd Nay Htoo reflected on his life as a refugee using the metaphor from Jeremiah of the cracked cistern or water jar. This week, we hear about another metaphor, that of the Potter and how the potter forms the clay, reshapes it and creates something new. Our reading today is full of meaning and is directly relevant to our own lives whether we are fathers or not. Let's have a look at Jeremiah, chapter 18, verses 1-11.

Well, I wonder how many of us, have had to be reshaped and recreated into something new? Perhaps we've experienced relationship breakdown, or been "let go" at work, or had a major health crisis. These situations

often trigger a deep reflection of who we are and where we are up to. How often have we come out the other end, somehow changed, reconfigured, or reworked? Have you had this experience?

In this week's Old Testament reading, God invites Jeremiah to enter a potter's shed and there observe the potter working with clay, so that Jeremiah may better hear God's words (Jeremiah 18:1), understand God's way with humanity (18:6), and summon God's people to repentance (18:11).

Jeremiah must leave his own familiar spaces as a priest and prophet, step away from the scriptures and the sanctuaries, and instead learn about God and God's people by watching an artist, a potter, at work.

Perhaps we should all visit the potter's shed. Or watch a painter mix her paints and fill her canvas. Or smell the shavings in the woodworker's garage as he shapes and matches the joints that will secure board to board. Or hear the songwriter test chord progressions and lyrical phrases as she scribbles, strums, and hums. When you do, perhaps you will learn something new about God, God the creator, and you will hear for yourself a fresh summons or call.

Other scriptures invite us to imagine God as ruler and judge, writer and teacher, farmer and builder, father, mother, and even lover. Jeremiah 18 invites us to see God as an artisan and artist. The image is not new in the scriptures. Genesis 1 portrays God as the first poet, designer and landscaper, as God speaks, divides, fashions, and populates the cosmos. In Genesis 2:7 God first shapes clay, sculpting and forming humankind from the sediment of the earth. As God's hands knead and smooth the moist dirt, God breathes life into this new creation, so that the human being

is simultaneously grounded by this connection to earth and animated by the very breath of God.

Now, in Jeremiah 18, we hear that God did not simply shape us once and for all. God tells Jeremiah, God's people are like clay that has not yet been fired. And if we too go down into the potter's shed, we may learn the difference between clay that has been fired and clay that has not yet been fired. Clay that has been fired dries, shrinks, and hardens into a permanent structure and shape. It may be decorative or functional, and is most often designed for a single purpose — a brick or tile, a bowl or plate, a mug or vase. It is easy to break. Such clay, now dry ceramic, is often lovely and often useful. It is also rigid and brittle.

Clay that has not been fired is malleable. It may be shaped and reshaped infinitely. It is a material of possibility: moldable, flexible, responsive.

Though God shaped humankind and breathed life into our nostrils, God did not fire the clay that we were made of. None of us is only a tile, a plate, or a vase. God is able to shape us and reshape us, and God labors tirelessly at the wheel on our behalf. God assesses our character, perceives our strengths and our weaknesses, builds on our strengths, and, when flaws are found in us, works diligently to remedy them.

After Jeremiah's visit to the potter's shed, and after God explains to Jeremiah just how God is a potter and just how God's people are like clay in God's hand, God changes gears and begins to talk about God's plans for nations and kingdoms. It almost seems to be a new subject, for now God is not talking about the house of Israel in particular, but rather about any nation. God also sets aside the image of a potter and clay, for a moment, and revisits imagery from Jeremiah's commission in chapter 1 that we

heard two weeks ago: plucking up, pulling down, building, and planting (1:10).

God's plans for a nation, a people, or a kingdom, God explains, are not fixed, and they are not determined apart from our own choices (Jeremiah 18:7-10). On one hand, God's good plan to build up a people may be thwarted by their choice to do what is evil. On the other hand, God may plan to pull down a kingdom that has made itself great on the backs of the oppressed, but if that nation turns from its evil, God's mind is changed concerning the destruction previously planned. Just as we, the unfired clay, respond to the potter's touch, to water, and to the wheel, so God responds to us.

And so we see that at the heart of this reading is the complex interaction between God the artist and creator, on one hand, and on the other, God's people, who are like clay in God's hands, but are also so much more. God cannot make us do anything. God cannot make us use our gifts, or choose the good. Nor can God effect our conversion or repentance, or direct our lives and our will to a new path and purpose, if we do not also choose this way.

We aren't automatons or rigid closed circuits. The shape of our character and our lives is not fixed. We remain supple. We, as individuals and as communities, may be formed and reformed through education and the practice of virtue, living the way Jesus taught us. We may also be deformed through abuse and ambition, greed and malice. We are susceptible to influence, suggestion, temptation, and corruption. But we are also resilient, and capable of astonishing goodness and true repentance. We are human.

Through it all, even in the company of others and even in relationship with God, each of us forms our own intentions and exercises our own free will.

At the conclusion of this reading, God asks Jeremiah to speak to the people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, to summon them to repentance. God has planned an end for the kingdom of Judah, but even this future is not fixed. Just as the potter returns to the wheel to remold the broken clay, so God asks the people to return, each one, from the evil path they have chosen, and to make their paths and their deeds good (Jeremiah 18:11).

Do you see God the Potter in our world? Can you see people and nations falling when their choices aren't good and generous the way God intended? What about in your own lives? Have you felt God shaping you? Creating in you through your life, the person that God intended you to be?

I think that there is much to ponder in this reading. When I look back over my life, I can see a steady progression of molding and shaping in my own personal and spiritual life. And what about us a church community? Are we letting God shape us as the body of Christ here in Lara and Little River? Are we giving other people the good news of hope in a loving God who takes a personal interest in each and every one of us?

Let us pray.

Loving and awesome Creator God,

We give you thanks for your message today calling us to respond to your creative love. We pray that we can respond with love and conviction, showing others by our own words and actions the love that you have for us. We pray in particular for fathers, that you will help them be the strong and

loving role models that you create them to be. We pray this in the name of Jesus, our Saviour and Redeemer, Amen.