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11 o'clock am

*The Community Church of Issaquah*  
Issaquah, Washington

## ***"The Potter"***

Jeremiah 18:1-10

A preacher's job isn't always easy—and today is one of those not-easy days. See today, Jeremiah doesn't hold back. Jeremiah doesn't hold back because God doesn't hold back. "Go to the potter's house" the Lord says, and Jeremiah, prophet of the Lord, goes.

Now if God had told me to go to a potter's house, as I headed over there I would be picturing this place as some kind of gentle, New-Age-music-in-the-background, calming, artsy vibe space. A place of peaceful connection with yourself and your medium. But if that's what I thought, I would be wrong.

See, Jeremiah heads down to the potter's house and once he gets there he sees the potter working at his wheel. Things are not going well. The vessel that he was working was not working out. It was supposed to be beautiful but had turned out to be a mess, and Jeremiah watches as the potter breaks down the clay with the heel of his hand, destroying what had been being formed and scraping it off the wheel, only to begin again.

This is a far cry from Bob Ross's gentle "Joy of Painting" TV show where all slip-ups become beautiful little bushes or splashes of water. This is more like when master artist Claude Monet shredded thirty of his water lily paintings before they were going to be exhibited because he thought they were terrible. I'm sure they weren't terrible. I mean, we're talking about Claude Monet. The potter Jeremiah goes down to see is like Monet. He has a vision for this hunk of clay. He wants this clay not to just take any shape—he wants it to be a beautiful, good, true shape. But the clay is not cooperating. The clay refuses to be molded under the potter's hand.

As Jeremiah watches this scene, the Bible says that the word of the Lord came to him, and it turns out that this uncooperative lump of clay is actually... Israel.

Israel, who God unilaterally walked through the animal entrails for, making a covenant with back in Genesis. Israel, who God had chosen

out of all of the nations of the world. Israel, God's beloved. It's this Israel that the God, the potter, is smashing down, reforming, and looking to make something new of.

What a word to us today. If God was willing to crush the failings of Israel and begin to build Israel back up anew, wouldn't God be willing to do the same with us if we go astray?

We cannot escape the basic message of this passage which is that we can and do go astray. And God can and will not hesitate in abandoning the line of work he's been going on and starting over with us if that is what it'll take to get the kind of finished work that he desires. God has covenanted and committed himself to us, but that doesn't exclude the act of pushing the clay back down, steamrolling the old and destroying what was coming into being so that there might be a NEW creation.

Thank God that God's commitment to us doesn't exclude it because so often what is coming into being isn't good. So often what is coming into being is selfishness or lack of courage or meanness. We forsake God's commandments so easily. I do. You do. And even more

importantly, we all together as a church do. God sets his mind to do something beautiful with us, sits down to work with us the clay, and begins pressing deeply, moving a section here, quickly supporting a side there—and then everything goes haywire because the clay is doing its own thing.

This is some funky clay. What other clay can choose not to cooperate?! Normal clay is just a lump. It has no will of its own. But human clay is different. Human clay can work against the desires of the potter. Human clay can decide to veer to the left when the potter is trying to shape it towards the right.

It's a good thing that God doesn't go along with the clay's own plans. They're not always good plans! It's a good thing that God isn't bound to prop us up when we're headed in the wrong direction.

I want to pause here for a second. The process of reforming can be uncomfortable for the clay and I need to clarify something. Sometimes we feel uncomfortable in life because God is reforming us. It's like growing pains. It's reforming pains. Our ligaments and

bones and stretching to be able to become the people God wants us to become. I can remember how painful it was when my family drove away from Ashton Hall at Seattle Pacific University, first day of my freshman year of college. That is a reforming pain. It's the pain that God allows in order for us to grow.

But there are other times we feel pain and it's not because God is reforming us. It's because the world is simply a fallen place, and there's evil in it now. It takes a whole community to discern which is which. We need each other to discern which of our "experiences are an inducement to necessary and faithful change, and what experiences are a sad reality of living in a broken world."<sup>1</sup>

I also want us to notice something. The potter sits down at his wheel. He breaks down the clay. It hasn't been going as he wants. But WHY does he break down the clay? He breaks down the clay so he can build it back up again better than before!

God's plan for us is to make us into something beautiful. And God

makes us something beautiful by getting involved with us. By getting closer and not farther away.

Just think: God doesn't just sit back and watch things slowly unfold—God gets in there and ACTS. It's like the difference between being a fish-owner and being a dog-owner. If you own a fish, you plunk it in a tank, drop a few grains of fish food in every morning and that's about it. My parents had their current goldfish for a decade before I learned its name. I can't even remember its name right now! Fish owning is a very hands off kind of relationship.

Now just think if you came home with a yellow Labrador puppy. You're not just going to pour a bowl of puppy chow in the morning and be good for the rest of the day. That would NOT work. You have to be right there watching every single move! That puppy can wreak a lot of havoc in a very short period of time!

God is not a fish-owning kind of God. God is the kind of God who watches over his Creation with the most minute care because Creation has and does go haywire so often. God is the God who rolls up his

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<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word, 28.

sleeves, dives in and gets closer than we may even be comfortable with.

God's not some distant watchmaker up in the sky who puts the watch together and then steps back and watches the watch run. After the watch is made, there's not really need for the watchmaker anymore. That's how many of the United States' founding fathers saw God. Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin were deists. Deists see God is as a hands-off God, a God who is far away and not close.

We're not deists. The God of Israel, the God of Jesus is not some distant deity. Our God, the Lord God, the God who got close enough to Adam to breathe into him, is always in our business. God doesn't just set the clay on the wheel and walk away. If that happened, we'd be doomed. We'd just sit there—a wet, cold lump, formless and void. The Lord, instead, gets involved. The Lord wants to be involved, desires to work with the clay, and keeps going when the clay isn't cooperating. The Lord doesn't mind the muck and slime of the clay or that his pure white robes start getting splattered.

You know, the Lord doesn't just get splattered. The clay doesn't just end up on his clothes. Our God is unlike any other god. Our God gets so involved with the clay, so wants the clay to become something beautiful, that God *becomes* the clay. In Jesus, the Lord of heaven and earth, our maker, our potter, takes on flesh and become like us—creatures of clay, made out of dust.

Jesus is the perfect piece of pottery that God desires. Jesus is the vessel that has been in perfect obedience to the potter's hand.

Jesus in being the perfect vessel has made a new mold. Because of his love for us, our unwilling human clay gets poured into Jesus' mold and we are made beautiful.

We don't get to choose what shape we are taking. Our shape has been chosen for us and that's good news.

You know, when I was growing up I was the weird teenager who often read the Old Testament prophets. Let me tell you when you're fourteen and you open up your Bible and read Jeremiah or Isaiah or Hosea, you live in a constant state of conviction of your own sin. I always

felt that I was doing things wrong—I just didn't know exactly what my wrong was! But I knew God was not satisfied with me! I mean right here today, didn't we read that God says that he will break down the clay?? I think I was the most introspective, self-accusatory piece of clay that God ever worked with.

But when I look back at my teenage self I see where I go wrong. See I was a strange piece of clay that was trying to form my own shape. I thought that if I just tried hard enough and fixed my perceived faults that I could spin myself on the potter's wheel and God would be satisfied with the vessel I became.

You know what though? We can't form ourselves. That's the clay's mistake. All the clay can do is submit itself to the master artist's skillful hands. All the clay can do is to stay pliable enough to be poured into the mold of Christ.

We must stay pliable. As a church we have to stay pliable. We can't do the heavy lifting of trying to spin our own selves on the potter's wheel. But we can open ourselves to a God whose will for us is to make us beautiful.

The great theologian Karl Barth describes the church as reformed and always reforming. We are reformed day by day on the divine potter's wheel. We are re-formed day by day by the potter. "God is determined for love of the world to shape communities whose distinctive ways of worship and life bear witness to the redemptive purposes of God."<sup>2</sup> We're not going to be taken off the wheel till we pass through the heat of death and are fired in the kiln of eternity when we will see God face to face.

We are re-formed. We are reforming. The potter hasn't given up on our lumps of clay yet.

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<sup>2</sup> Feasting on the Word, 29.