

Artisan Works

Lynette Sparks
Third Presbyterian Church
September 4, 2016 (Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost)
Jeremiah 18:1-11

There is a piece of pottery that graces a shelf in my office. It's not very big – only about 4 inches in diameter, and not even two inches tall. Truth be told, I've walked past it thousands of times over the past couple of years, and haven't paid much notice to it since the day I moved in my office. Yet today's text gave me pause, and I went over to look at it.

It's a small, handcrafted dish given to me as an ordination gift. The woman who made it isn't a professional artist; she does it as a hobby. I took the dish and turned it over to inspect it more closely. Its base is round, but the upper rim is more like a square with rounded corners. And it has an almost rope-like design imprinted around the rim.

I looked at this small dish, and I began to wonder what might have happened when she made it. Did she envision the end product and bring it to be on her first try? Did she take that indiscriminate lump of clay, throw it on the potter's wheel, moisten her hands with water, anchor her elbows against her body to steady it, and then center it, press and shape it into the vision residing in her mind's eye – did she do all that on her first go-around?

Or is the dish on my shelf a do-over? What if the clay didn't respond the way she wanted it to? What if it was uncooperative, and she had to smash the clay down and begin the process all over again, to center and shape, to open it and pull up the sides, until its shape and form were just what she wanted it to be? What if she had to do it over multiple times - before she could ultimately fire and glaze it?

I think it's lovely, even though in its finished state, if you look at it closely, it's not perfectly round at its base; it's not perfectly symmetrical around the rim. Yet it's still beautiful, and it's still useful. It'll hold small items. It'll even hold water if I wanted it to. And besides, I like looking at it because it reminds me of who made it, and who gave it to me. I imagine the care she took in making it.

I'm not a potter. I've never sat down at a potter's wheel myself. I've only ever watched someone else. And those who do this say that working clay is demanding. It takes a lot of external force to mold an unremarkable lump of clay into its fully realized creative potential.

I just submitted an application for a continuing education program, and one of the questions on the application asked me to reflect on the events or personal growth moments that shaped my sense of who I am in ministry.

Perhaps you've done the same, at least informally. Perhaps you've reflected on your own life of faith – on those experiences that shaped you and helped you to deepen and grow in some way. I'd venture a pretty strong guess that when you look at them, there's hardly a gentle touch in any of those transformative events. Instead, they are weighty, even forceful as they form us: the circumstance where you find all of your usual lifelines are gone; you found out the hard way that the thing that you thought you always wanted wasn't worth having at all; maybe it was a conflict you had to work through; the obstacle you had to face; the hurt you experienced; the doubts you had to overcome; the ways you had to change.

That's often the sticking point – the ways we have to change, to be changed, to be transformed, to be reshaped and reworked over and over again as God is actively at work in us. Even if we

don't like it, whoever is sitting in this sanctuary probably gets that at some level. As our experiences stack up, we see the lessons we had to learn to become more faithful. For some those things aren't in the past, but are happening right now. We see how God works through the events and people and even crises in our lives to turn us away from what is destructive and turn us toward what's life-giving.

That's not to say that I believe God is a puppeteer causing these things to happen. I don't. Yet I do believe that God isn't bound by our present circumstances, and is even able to take that spoiled material and fashion it into something beautiful and of worth.

Even as I hope this rings true for us individually, every commentator I read reiterates that Jeremiah's metaphor is much more about the community than it is about the individual. Jeremiah's community needed to change. Judah was ready to forget about its covenant commitment to God, and the prophet Jeremiah warned them. They needed to change, to be changed, to respond to the active hand of God in their midst. The community was spoiled, and God would rework and reshape it.

Community change is hard, especially where tradition carries the day. We might perfectly like things just the way they are. But if we sense that God is somehow reshaping the church for some new context, that could feel like unwelcome news. That sense that God can have that kind of power over us makes me uncomfortable. I would rather be in control. I would rather shape the world. I would rather shape God in my image. But the witness of Scripture is that even as we exercise our human freedom, and even when we fail to be faithful, God doesn't just throw us out. Rather, God's full weight is still at work shaping and forming us.

Eric Smith observes that potters never waste clay. He says he knows, because he's married to one. Potters would never just toss used clay out. If it failed somewhere in the process, the potter would recycle it, and reclaim it into something new. So it is with God. Even if we fail to be malleable, even if we resist, God in great mercy gives it yet another go.

A story came across my news feed about First Presbyterian Church of Homewood, Illinois. This small church went through an assessment process [one I've also done some work with], to help them think about their congregation and its changing context. And through this process of self-reflection, the congregation said they discovered that the things they were passionate about weren't relevant to anyone but themselves. They said it was painful to realize that and painful to admit it out loud. They realized that even though they were wonderful, God-loving people, they were also out of touch – they didn't really know their community, and they weren't connecting with their increasingly multi-cultural neighbors. And through this process, they came to realize they not only needed to, but they wanted to know their surrounding community. They wanted to show they loved them with the deep and abiding and tangible love of God. They came to know that that's *why* they were present there. It was their reason for being.

So they decided they would get to know the community around them by gathering around the table. They invited them to come break bread and share a meal with them, once a week. They didn't know how long they could do this, or where it would go, or even where the money would come from. But they started nonetheless. And then they felt called to keep at it. And their ministry changed and grew and transformed them from the inside out, as they found new ways to give and share with their neighbors. Interestingly, I noted that the article says nothing about whether or not their membership grew, or whether their budget increased. It talked about how they were re-formed, re-shaped to live in beloved community with people they didn't previously know. They took a holy risk, not knowing what would come of it.

For me, it illustrates what John Debevois wrote: "There is never a report that the Lord will reshape the people into something other than what the potter, the creator, intends...Reshaping will not look like disaster but resurrection."

Or, in the words of Fred Pratt Green's hymn text:

*The church of Christ in every age,
beset by change but Spirit-led,
must claim and test its heritage
and keep on rising from the dead.*

I believe God's hand has been and continues to be on this community of faith, molding and re-fashioning us to respond as the world changes around us. I re-read the history of Third Church. Although we're in the same sanctuary as we were in the 1890's, we have changed. If we hadn't, we probably wouldn't be here anymore. At places along the way, God called us to change and respond in faithful ways. And I suspect in some cases it went more smoothly than others! It was probably even messy and chaotic more than once. With every new person who's entered our midst, with every demographic change around us, with new urgent questions and crises in each generation, God has been at the potter's wheel taking this old clay and remaking something new.

Have you ever seen an artistic process that was perfectly neat? Where no paint spattered, no hands ever got dirty, no materials ever got strewn about, no clay ever resisted? Imagine what might have been like to debate the merits of women's ordination here more than 50 years ago, or way back in 1987 talk about openly welcoming persons who are LGBTQ. Even now we work through day to day tensions and competing goals when people who are vulnerable enter this building for food or shelter. We're forced to examine our preconceived notions and put ourselves in someone else's shoes – the shoes of someone who doesn't have access to privileges we take for granted. Sometimes the church responds well, and sometimes the church is a misshapen vessel.

An art and faith blog by Lynn Miller showed photos and talked about the work of George Ohr, who many consider to be America's first "art potter." According to Miller, "Critics said that his work lacked proportion, grace and dignity." You see, his creations had very thin clay walls that he would twist and contort into distinctive and unusual shapes. He did so not to reshape the clay into a "perfect" pot, but to create something unique.

She said that George Ohr "saw beauty in the crumpled, the folded, the imperfect... where others saw only oddness and irregularity and difference. That sounds like grace," she said. "The clay matters. The potter matters. Because the potter determines what forms are acceptable and what forms will be reshaped."

In addition to my imperfect, yet beautiful little ceramic bowl, I have two more pieces of pottery on a different office shelf. They were ordination gifts as well. These other two are a set – a bread plate and an accompanying chalice. They represent the bread of life and the cup of salvation. Together they signify Jesus come to earth in flesh and blood on behalf of the whole world. And unlike my slightly lopsided little bowl, the chalice and plate are symmetrical, and perfectly round.

Different creations – the bowl that I have on one shelf is useful and beautiful and imperfect. The plate and chalice that I have on another shelf are perfectly proportioned. Yet each is made from clay. And each has been shaped by the potter. And they really shouldn't be apart. They belong together, side by side. Maybe I'll have to go and rearrange my office shelves.

Amen.

