

Worship Series: “A Prophet’s Witness: From Grief to Hope”

16th Sunday after Pentecost

“In the Hands of the Potter”—Sermon Text: Jeremiah 18:1-11

FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

4 September 2016

“A fanatic is one who can’t change his mind and won’t change the subject”

-- Winston Churchill (1874 - 1965).

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“Extreme Makeover: Home Edition” was an American reality television series that ended in 2012. As you may know it provided home improvements for less fortunate families. Each episode featured a family which faced a hardship—for example a natural disaster or a household member with a life-threatening illness. The show’s focus usually was a renovation of a family’s home—interior, exterior, and landscaping. If the house was beyond repair, the show replaced it. From this television program others have spun off, for instance, “HGTV’s Fixer Upper” with Chip and Joanna Gains.

Our lesson today concerns an “extreme spiritual” makeover brought to us by the Prophet Jeremiah. Hear the day’s lesson:

1 The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 2 “Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” 3 So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. 4 The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

5 Then the word of the Lord came to me: 6 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. 7 At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, 8 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. 9 And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, 10 but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it.

11 Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings (Jer. 18:1-11).

In our reading, God bids Jeremiah to go to the potter's workshop and watch the potter work with clay. It is a word God speaks to Jeremiah with a visual aid so that Jeremiah may summon God's people to a makeover or invite them to change. In the religion business we call this "conversion" (18:11)!

Jeremiah learns something new about God and God's people by observing an artist at work. Have you ever thought about watching a potter, sculptor, painter, or a weaver and then learning something about God? I am pretty sure neither had Jeremiah. Perhaps a lesson such as this—one that invites us to look at God from a new and different perspective—can help us enter a new experience with the divine. If we can and do, then we may learn something new about God. We might even hear a creative directive for a new call from God.

God is often described in various ways in our Bible: king and ruler, judge, writer and teacher, farmer and builder, father, mother, and even as a divine lover if you have ever wandered into the Song of Solomon. Yet, the prophet Jeremiah here in the 18th chapter asks us to understand God as a craft worker or artist. Do you remember all the way back in Genesis 2:7 God creates from clay, shaping the first person from dust. And God animates Adam—and us—by God's own breathe.

What about the issue of human freedom and the immutability or changelessness of God? What occurs here in Jeremiah 18 comes to a head in verse 11—which reads: *"Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings."*

The potter image in this passage introduces an important theological issue. Note here that we see the tension between divine power and mortal freedom. Do our actions as human beings really have any effect on what God does? Are we individuals or communities locked into a sequence of actions that God has already determined?

This passage offers us a peek at the complex interaction between God as an artist and

creator and God's people who presumably have free choice. God cannot make us do anything. God cannot make us use our gifts or choose the good. Nor can God effect our conversion or direct our lives and our will to a new path and purpose if we do not also choose them. But God is also a great persuader.

Sometimes people need persuasion. A Junior High principal was have a problem with some young ladies that were beginning to wear lipstick. When applying it in the school's bathroom they were blotting their lips on the mirrors and leaving lip prints. The principal asked for help from the teachers, but the behavior continued. He even called the parents of some of the youngsters but with no real success.

Finally he gathered in the bathroom all those who wore lipstick. After a lecture about how hard the mirrors are to clean with lipstick on them, he asked the custodian to demonstrate the difficulty. The custodian took a long handled brush, dipped it in the toilet and vigorously rubbed the lipstick off the mirror. From that moment going forward there was no more lipstick found on the bathroom mirrors.

We human beings are not automatons/robots. We have free will and can shape our character. In other words, our lives are not fixed. As verse 11 reminds us, the potter can return to the wheel and either begin anew—or finish the clay project that the potter has already started. All God asks is that the household of faith return/convert to being faithful to the creator/Potter God.

Robert Butchart and his wife Jennie came to the west coast of Canada because of rich limestone deposits necessary for cement production. In 1904, they established their home near his quarry on Tod Inlet on Vancouver Island. In 1909, when the limestone quarry was exhausted, Jennie set about turning it into the Sunken Garden, which was completed in 1921. They named their home "*Benvenuto*" which means welcome in Italian. They soon began to receive visitors to their gardens.

Jennie had once stood gazing at an exhausted and ugly pit that we would call a quarry.



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Instead of and ugly unsightliness, she rather saw—even imagined—what it could look like with a creative flair and a lot of work. Butchart Sunken Gardens is quite a beautiful site even now a hundred years later. Just in case you wondered, God sees us that way too—if we but turn in God’s direction. Amen.

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