

Jeremiah 18:1-12
The Politically Incorrect Jeremiah
The Potter and the Clay
6.6.21

James Weldon Johnson, born 1871, died 1938
Was a writer, a civil rights activist
And an early leader in the NAACP.

He wrote poetry and he composed songs.

He wrote, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*
A hymn frequently called
The national anthem of Black America.

Read the lyrics sometime and you'll understand why.

He also wrote poetry
And the poem, *The Creation*
Is a favorite of mine.

Allow me to read the last verse.

God had created everything up to this point
Except for humankind.

*Then God sat down—
On the side of a hill where he could think;
By a deep, wide river he sat down;
With his head in his hands,
God thought and thought,
Till he thought: I'll make me a man!*

*Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled him down;*

*And there the great God Almighty
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
Who rounded the earth in the middle of his hand;
This great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till he shaped it in is his own image;*

Then into it he blew the breath of life,

And man became a living soul.

Amen. Amen.

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The imagery of God as a potter
And humankind as the clay
Threads itself through the Bible.

It begins in Genesis.

Genesis 2:7 NRSV then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

Job uses the same imagery when he speaks to God.

**Job 10:9 NIV Remember that you molded me like clay.
Will you now turn me to dust again?**

Along with the prophet Jeremiah

The Prophet Isaiah uses the imagery as well.

Isaiah 29:16 NIV

You turn things upside down,

as if the potter were thought to be like the clay!

Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it,

“You did not make me”?

Can the pot say to the potter,

“You know nothing”?

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul uses the imagery.

**Romans 9:21 CEV Doesn't a potter have the right to
make a fancy bowl and a plain bowl out of the same
lump of clay?"**

We have songs written with the imagery

That suggests that the clay is always pliable

That the clay submits to the potter

As he shapes and molds it as he sees fit.

But the imagery in Jeremiah is not that way.

The clay is not so pliable and not so easily molded.

**Jeremiah 18:4 NLT But the jar he was making did not
turn out as he had hoped, so he crushed it into a lump
of clay again and started over.**

The potter could not mold or shape the clay
As he had intended.

Because of the clay's nonpliable consistency
The potter grew frustrated
And crushed it back into a lump to begin again.

Having watched the potter working the clay
Jeremiah turned to the people of Israel.

"You know where I am going with this, don't you?"
"You are the clay and God is the potter!"

"And if you don't shape up (literally) (pun intended)
I will crush you and start over again, say the Lord."

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You don't need much imagination to get the point.

As God said to Jeremiah at the very beginning
When God initially called him

"I have put my words in your mouth
To tell the people that I will pluck up and pull down
To destroy and overthrow
And to build and to plant."

We can get into a lengthy discussion
On whether God uses evil to accomplish his goals.

We will save that for a later discussion.

For now, we know the people of Judah
Did not change their ways.

And soon after disaster struck
When in 586 BC the Babylonians invaded Judah.

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Here's an interesting thing.

According to my sermon outline on Jeremiah
This Scripture Lesson was to have ended on verse 11.

I listened to some commentary on this.

And one of the commentators said
They wanted to end the lesson on a more positive note
So they ended it with verse 11.

But Walter Bruggeman says it should end with verse 12.

Hear it again.

Jeremiah 18:11-12 NLT

11 “Therefore, Jeremiah, go and warn all Judah and Jerusalem. Say to them, ‘This is what the Lord says: I am planning disaster for you instead of good. So turn from your evil ways, each of you, and do what is right.’”

12 But the people replied, “Don’t waste your breath. We will continue to live as we want to, stubbornly following our own evil desires.”

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In response to the people’s obstinance
In the following chapter, God tells Jeremiah
To go buy a clay pot from the potter

And in view of everyone

Throw the pot down as hard as you can
Letting it smash to pieces.

And then say to the people
“This is what the Lord will do to you!”

Again, we don't need a big imagination to get the picture.

Jerusalem and Judah were destroyed
And the people went to live as refugees in Babylon.

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We often interpret the imagery of the potter and the clay
As a lesson on individual relationships with God.

Our personal sins prevent God
From molding us into a godly person.

But the way Jeremiah uses the illustration
It becomes more of an accusation of corporate sin
Rather than personal sin.

In last week's Scripture Lesson
We heard God accuse the people

Of their corporate sin against
The foreigner, the orphan, and the widow.

Jeremiah 7:5-7 NIV

⁵ If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, ⁶ if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, ⁷ then I will let you live in

this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever.

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Jeremiah calls the people to repentance.

The call is both personal and corporate.

The church has done a good job

Calling folks to repent from individual sins.

In fact, a lot of churches focusing entirely

On personal relationships with God

With little regard to our corporate relationship.

In other words, the church has not done as good a job

Calling folks to repent from corporate sin.

So what do we mean when we say corporate sin?

Corporate sin is not something only corporations do!!

Corporate sins are acts done by a group of people.

Since we're talking about the people of God

Then, corporate sin means sin committed by the church.

Let's identify some of the church's corporate sins.

Racism and discrimination are two.

Misogyny, the fear and hatred of women

Xenophobia, the fear or hatred of foreigners.

How about Islamophobia? Or Antisemitism?

The fear or hatred of Muslims or Jews.

Has the church been guilty of these sins?

How about homophobia? Or sexism?

And how about the subtler corporate sins?

Does the church sin when it does not spend money

Given to spend for the ministries of the church?

Does it sin when it neglects care for creation?

Or overlooks the needy right at its doorstep?

Is it a corporate sin when we avoid sharing the love of God

When God gives us opportunities to do so?

Does the church sin

When we become like an exclusive country club

When we become class conscience?

If the bottom line of the church ethos

Is to love God with everything we got

And love our neighbor as ourselves

And we fail to do that to the best of our ability

Aren't we complicit in corporate sin?

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When Jeremiah became God's mouthpiece

And he called the church to amend its ways

What did the people say?

“Don’t waste your breath on us.”

“We will live as we want to.”

“We will follow our own desire.”

Where is West Richmond in all of this?

And like the Scripture Lesson before us today

Might the Potter be frustrated in trying to mold and shape us
Into the vessel God intended our church to be?

We need to identify those corporate sins we’ve committed.

We need to confess our sins and repent from them.

And we need to call upon God’s Spirit
To have its way with us as a church
To mold us and shape for God’s will and way.

I mean, isn’t that what revival is all about?
Corporate repentance and renewal?

I close with a Responsive Confession of Sin
Found in *The Book of Common Prayer*

Let us pray.

Almighty and most merciful God, we have erred and strayed
from your ways like lost sheep, we have followed too much
the devices and desires of our own hearts, we have offended
against your holy will, we have left undone those things
which we ought to have done, and we have done those
things which we ought not to have done.

People in Unison:

**Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.**

**We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.**

We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.

**For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.**

May the Almighty and merciful Lord grant you absolution
and remission of all your sins, true repentance, amendment
of life, and the grace and consolation of his Holy Spirit.
Amen.