

Jeremiah 18:1-12
The Potter's Hands
11.10.24

Jeremiah steps out of his study
A study filled with his Bibles and commentaries

He leaves the security and sanctuary of his church
Steps away from his familiar surroundings
And heads downtown.

He needs a different environment to hear God's voice.

It's a good thing to do.

We all agreed in our last Sunday school class
That God speaks to us in a multitude of ways
And through a multitude of means.

And so, Jeremiah went for a walk
And ended up looking in the window of a potter's shop.

And as he watches the potter reworking a lump of clay
Jeremiah hears God speak.

"Can I not do with you what the potter has done?"

"Can I not mold you into anything I choose?"

The metaphor here is
That God has the absolute power and control
Over the lump of clay.

Like the potter

God has the ability to mold and shape us
Into anything God wants.

It's a metaphor that threads through the Bible.

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It begins in creation

Genesis 2:7 CEB

⁷ the Lord God formed the human from the topsoil of the fertile land and blew life's breath into his nostrils. The human came to life.

Job uses the same imagery.

Job 10:9a NIV Remember that you molded me like clay.

The Prophet Isaiah uses it but slightly changes the imagery.

Isaiah 29:16

¹⁶ 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"?

Similarly, from Paul, in the NT.

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 sang a song reflecting God's power
To mold us as God pleases.

It suggests the clay is malleable.

But the clay here is not so pliable and easily molded.

<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/5tN08hchC2k?feature=share>

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.

Having watched the potter working that tough piece of clay
Jeremiah got the illustration he needed
To finish the sermon he was working on.

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As with most metaphors, it goes only so far.

The metaphor of God as potter and humans as clay
Ends with God's question
"Can I not do with you as the potter does to the clay?"

Apparently not.

If God has the power to shape us any way God likes
Then what is happening here?

What is happening here is
The clash between God's sovereignty and free will.

God tries to mold the people of Judah
But they are too stubborn and won't let him.

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The common understanding of God's sovereignty is this.

God has the authority and the power to rule over creation
And nothing happens without God's direct initiative.

Everything that occurs
Occurs within the realm of God's will.

If we move this way, it's because of God
If we move that way, God made us do it.

However, as we understand the Eden event
God granted the first couple free will
The ability to choose their own destiny.

Consequently, we are faced with the mystery
Of how God's sovereignty and our free will meet.

Last week's sermon on Jonah
And this week's sermon in Jeremiah
Gives us a glimpse of this strangely incompatible mix

The question is, not only how it works
But why God would give us free will.

God gives us free will
So that we might experience genuine love.

1. Love: we can choose to love God or we can choose not to. Love that is fixed or forced is not true love.
2. Dignity: the dignity of being rational beings who can control our own actions and make our own decisions.
3. Moral responsibility: free will gives us the responsibility, accountability and liability, to choose right from wrong.

And that, is the problem that Jeremiah is addressing.

The people of Judah and citizens of Jerusalem
Were practicing their free will
And were clearly heading in the wrong direction.

God calls them out on their bad behavior.

Jeremiah 7:9-10 CEB

⁹ Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, sacrifice to Baal and go after other gods that you don't know, ¹⁰ and then come and stand before me in this temple that bears my name, and say, "We are safe," only to keep on doing all these detestable things?

God gives Judah a warning

Jeremiah 18:11b NIV

So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.

And what was Judah's response to God's call to repent?

Last week, we saw Nineveh, a foreign city
Repent and amend their ways
Much to the chagrin of Jonah.

This week, Judah, God's very own chosen people
Respond this way.

Jeremiah 18:12 NLT

¹² "Don't waste your breath. We will continue to live as we want to, stubbornly following our own evil desires."

The rest of the story is that in 587 BC
Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army
Invaded, conquered, and destroyed much of Judah
Jerusalem's wall, and its most holy shrine, the temple razed.

Here you have a people who God brought out of slavery
Who promised and delivered to them
A land flowing with milk and honey

A people God helped to become a mighty nation

A God who sought continually to mold and shape them
More and more into their full potentiality

For it to come down to this.

"We will live as we want to!"

This is not dissimilar to our world today.

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We live in a world full of the evidence
Of the destructive power of human choice.

We are confronted daily with the consequences
Of wrong decisions and immoral choices
All resulting from free will.

Using the potter and clay metaphor in another way
We can be shaped and molded
By the pressures of our world

The world does a good job shaping and molding.

Greed, materialism, the pursuit of selfish goals
These outside pressures
Shape us into something
We were never meant to be.

The good news is, however
God's love never changes

And God's ability to shape and mold
Is available through Jesus.

Through Christ, like the potter's own clay
We get a second chance.

God takes each lump of us
And throws it back on the wheel and works it again.

The potter's love for that lump of clay
Is the metaphor we must cling to.

We're not simply in the hands of fate or an unknown destiny

We get to choose.
And even when we choose unwisely
Or misuse the freedom God has given us

The potter's love remains constant.

We have been given the incredible gift of free will
The power to shape, to choose, to change
Our personal lives and the world around us.

With this gift comes responsibility

Micah 6:8 NLT

**⁸No, O people, the Lord has told you what is good,
and this is what he requires of you:
to do what is right, to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with your God.**

This is the power God has given us
The power of God's love working through us.

Think about this
There are 2.4 billion Christians in the world today.

What if every Christian was determined
To be a positive force in their corner of the world?

Would it make a difference?
Would the world notice?

This is the Spirit's power that lies within our hands.

We are to be instruments of God's peace in the world.

God gave us free will
And with that comes the responsibility
To be a part of God's activity in the world.

Through God's Spirit, we have the power
To shape the world around us.

Picture this: just as the potter shapes and molds us
We can be the shapers and molders of our communities

We do this through the core values we embrace as Brethren.

Christ-likeness: Reflecting the love and heart of Jesus.

Servant leadership: Serving the church with both humility and boldness.

Discernment: Seeking the leading of the Holy Spirit through prayer, scripture, and the gathered community.

Community: Cultivating relationships and building up the body of Christ.

Stewardship: Caring for all God's gifts and the resources of the Church of the Brethren.

Simplicity: Living simply so that we have room in our lives for God and for others.

Hospitality: Following Jesus' example of respecting all people and inviting them into his fellowship.

Peacemaking: Acting as instruments of reconciliation and justice.

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You might ask, what does that look like
In our everyday living?

How can we, as individuals and as a community
Be instruments of peace in a world in disarray?

Let the Spirit guide you to take one concrete step.

Reach out to someone this week.

Maybe it's a neighbor going through a difficult time
A friend in need of encouragement
Or a stranger who simply needs a kind word.

Choose to forgive someone who has hurt you.
It's simple and such a gracious act.

Give generously.

Whether it be love or forgiveness, or generosity.

These are small steps

But they have the power to change the world.

Let us be shapers of our world

And reflections of the potter's love.

Let us start today.