

REDEEMED TO REFRESH

Sermon, September 4, 2016

Texts: Jeremiah 18:1-11; Philemon 1-21

*Have Thine own way, Lord, have Thine own way; Thou art the potter, I am the clay
Mold me and make me after Thy will, While I am waiting, yielded and still.*

The lyrics of that first stanza from the hymn just sang are inspired by both Romans 9:21 (*"Does not the potter have the right to make out of ... clay some pottery for noble purposes?"*) and Isaiah 64:8 (*"Yet, O Lord, You are our Father. We are the clay; You are the potter. We are all the work of Your hand."*), but are also wonderfully appropriate for the passage we just read from the prophet Jeremiah. I've mentioned this the last two times we've looked at this Jeremiah passage in the past twelve years or so, but the Apostles' Creed, as Paul, Isaiah and Jeremiah may have worded it, might read *"I believe in God the Potter Almighty, maker of heaven and earth."*

In biblical times, the potter's wheel was made of stone and run by foot power. A small flat stone, on which the pot was fashioned, was connected to a lower, larger stone that the potter turned by sweeping side to side with his feet; this was eons before electric turntables, and even ages before the invention of the crankshaft-lever mechanism that converted up-and-down foot motion into rotary motion, much like the early manual sewing machines. Before that invention, the potter had to exercise great coordination and literally had to throw his whole body into making a pot as he had to spin the large stone with his feet, knees and thighs as he crafted his work; the creator of pottery would be vigorously involved ... hands, feet, limbs, heart and soul ... in his creation. He would dig a clump of mud out of a crock, place it on the wheel, and begin kicking sideways with his feet as he would center the clay in his muscular, wet hands, the moisture oozing between his strong fingers. Slowly a pot or a vase or an urn would emerge from beneath his palms and fingers as he continued leaning over the wheel, kicking with his feet, smoothing out lumps, removing impurities, forming the creation out of the clay with his hands. Every now and then, having seen a critical flaw only a master potter can discern, he might crush the whole thing and start over. That's what the potter was doing the day Jeremiah came to call: *"But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as it seemed best to him."* Please note: The potter didn't discard the clay; rather, he patiently preserved and re-formed it.

After watching for a while, Jeremiah observed that's what God's been doing with His people all along. God, like a potter at the wheel, is intimately and even vigorously involved with His creation, and is ever at work on us ... shaping, forming, stretching, pushing, molding us into shape. God the Potter Almighty has us firmly in hand as the spinning wheel of life relentlessly spins around and around (*as the Blood, Sweat and Tears sang in 1969, "... spinning wheel, got to go 'round!'"*).¹ In fact, when in Genesis 2:7 it says "... the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground ..." the Hebrew word "formed" suggests a potter forming (*or molding*) clay. And God still has us firmly in hand as the wheel goes around ... smoothing, soothing, shaping, molding and remaking us into beautiful and useful and treasured vessels.

About thirty miles east of Spokane, Washington is the town of Coeur d'Alene, Idaho; my son and I just traveled through there last week. Years ago I came across a story from Coeur d'Alene: Late one night about twenty years ago some local residents called the police complaining about a car driving around and around the neighborhood ... in reverse. Police came to the scene, saw the car and the teenaged girl driving it, and pulled her over. In a burst of tears the girl told police her parents had let her use the car, but she had put too much mileage on it. *"I was just trying to unwind some of it before they came home!"* she wailed. Now, there's a sermon in there somewhere! There are parts of our lives all of us would like to stop and rewind and do over, but the "spinning wheel" of life just doesn't run in reverse. If somehow driving around and around and around the block in reverse would expunge our record, we would all go out to the church parking lot and rev up our engines! But something more than that is needed ... and in a nutshell, that is what God's grace in Jesus Christ is all about.

When through faith in Jesus Christ we place our lives in the hands of God the Potter Almighty, He keeps us firmly in hand as the wheel of life keeps going 'round and 'round; He's smoothing, soothing, shaping, molding and at times remaking us into beautiful and useful and treasured vessels. As our lives take shape, many flaws appear which need correction. We got lumps, from things we have done or have left undone, or from impurities we have allowed into our lives. There's some bad dirt mixed up in our clay. God the Potter Almighty feels the friction of those lumps in His hands. At times the lumps may be so bad He has to allow the whole thing to be crushed altogether before He begins anew. But the God the Potter Almighty patiently, lovingly continues His fashioning, redeeming, artistic handiwork, and day by day, with each turn of the wheel, we are being made new. We are being made into better pots. Some of you may have watched the Bill O'Reilly show, where he begins each program by

¹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Xv8nYvolwY>

saying, *"Caution! You are about to enter a no spin zone!"* Well, I contemplated adapting that for our Call to Worship this morning: *"Caution! You are about to enter a SPIN zone."* For here in worship we are all about placing ourselves on the spinning wheel to allow God the Potter Almighty to go to work on us to mold us, shape us, use us as He sees fit.

Pots and vessels were not created just to be decorative, they were primarily used to provide or prepare nourishment and refreshment ... pots and vessels were (and are) used to cook, store, serve and otherwise convey nourishment to ourselves and others. I draw our attention to one delightful verse from our Epistle reading; Paul writes to his friend Philemon and says, verse 7, *"Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints."* In short, Paul told Philemon he was a good pot; he was a faithful and constant source of energizing *refreshment* to all who encountered him! This is a high compliment Paul is paying his friend.

A bit of background to this short epistle: Philemon had a runaway servant by the name of Onesimus. He had fled Philemon's household; we don't know not why, but we can make an educated guess from the context of this letter. We know from other sources that Philemon was the well-to-do head of a large household in Colossae, a leader of the church that met in his home, and he was a good friend of Paul. Onesimus was once Philemon's servant; how that had come to be, we do not know. Probably Onesimus had fallen into debt to Philemon and indentured himself to pay it off, which was not an uncommon practice in that day. Many of the people who worked the land had fallen into debt because of the onerous taxation of "Caesar Care" from the occupying Romans; many lost their land and their property, and opted to indenture themselves to wealthier citizens like Philemon in order to pay the bills and/or survive. Why did Onesimus run? Some have speculated he may have committed the desperate crime of absconding with some of Philemon's property (*also not an uncommon occurrence in such situations*); hence Paul's offer to repay any debt Onesimus may have incurred ... however, we really don't know for sure. All we know is that while he was on the run, Onesimus became a follower of Jesus Christ through Paul's ministry. Like clay on the wheel, Onesimus was transformed from one who was *useless* to one who was *useful*, as Paul writes in verse 11: *"Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful to you and to me."*

There's actually something of a pun here in the original language ... the name "Onesimus" literally means "Useful One." Paraphrased, Paul is saying, *"The one called 'Useful One' became useLESS to you, since he ran away; perhaps even worse than useless if he stole from you. But by God's grace, Onesimus is now living up to his name! He has become very useful to me, and I guarantee he will be very useful to you."* That's something, by the way, that God the Potter Almighty has done for countless people throughout the ages and continues to do so to this day ... redeeming them, shaping them, changing them from *useless* to *useful*. And so, Paul asks Philemon to give Onesimus a second chance. *"Don't punish him, I'll repay whatever he may have taken, receive him. Give him a clean slate, a fresh start. In fact, give him more than a fresh start; treat him like a beloved brother."*

Christian faith is the faith of the second chance. That is the heart of our theology. We were all, every one of us, useless and perhaps even worse than useless at one time or another. But Jesus Christ gave His life to make us useful, useful to God and useful to others. Second chances are why Christ came into the world. By the way, when God lays hands on us to reshape us through Jesus Christ, usually we are not the only ones being transformed and refreshed; it invariably includes and involves those around us. Notice, as Onesimus had been given another chance, as he is shaped on God the Potter Almighty's wheel, that wheel envelopes Philemon as well; Philemon learns lessons of grace and compassion and forgiveness himself as he is persuaded to graciously receive his servant back, not just as a servant, but as a brother ... even more than that, as a *beloved* brother ... the very same language, by the way, Paul used to describe his own relationship with Philemon!

Some of you may remember there's a nice epilogue to this story: Some fifty years after this short letter was written by Paul to Philemon, Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, was on his way to martyrdom ... Ignatius was sentenced to death, and eventually killed by lions in the Coliseum. On his way to his end in Rome, during his transport to and imprisonment in Rome, Ignatius wrote a series of letters to several churches he had encountered in his ministry. Some of these letters have been preserved over the centuries; they contain some of the earliest written records we have of the first century church's developing theology and history (*in fact, Ignatius is credited as the one who first coined the phrase, "the catholic church."*) One of those letters of Ignatius was written to the church at Ephesus, and in that letter Ignatius praised their bishop by name.

The name of that bishop? Onesimus ... believed by historians to be the one and the same Onesimus mentioned in this letter to Philemon.

Of all Paul's letters, Philemon is the only one addressed to an individual about a private matter ... and in all likelihood, that letter was passed on by Philemon to Onesimus, and was kept and treasured and preserved by that good bishop of Ephesus until it made its way into the New Testament canon. Onesimus, who was the grateful, redeemed, refashioned, refreshed, formerly useless servant who apparently went on to become a *very* useful vessel ... by the grace of God the Potter Almighty.