

FROM USELESS TO ULYSSES

Sermon, September 8, 2019

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 the hymn we just sang are wonderfully appropriate for the passage we read from the prophet Jeremiah. I've mentioned this each of the three times we've looked at this Jeremiah passage in the past twenty years or so, but I think that if Jeremiah had a hand in wording the Apostles' Creed, he probably would have it read, "I believe in God the *Potter* Almighty, maker of heaven and earth."

In Jeremiah's day, the potter's wheel was made of stone and run by foot power. A small flat stone, on which the pottery 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. The potter had to literally throw his whole body into his work as he had to spin the large stone with his feet, knees and thighs as he crafted his creation. The potter was vigorously involved ... hands, feet, limbs, heart and soul ... in his creation. The potter 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, and with his hands smoothing out lumps, removing impurities, forming the creation out of the clay. Every now and then, having seen a critical flaw or crack develop, 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 Blood, Sweat and Tears sang in 1969 "... spinning wheel, got to go 'round!'*).¹ 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 vessels. As our lives take shape, flaws appear which need fixing. 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 may have 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 handiwork, and day by day, with each turn of the wheel, we are being fashioned, remade into better pots.

Pots and vessels were not created just to be decorative items to adorn some shelf, they were primarily used to provide and/or prepare and/or convey nourishment and refreshment ... pots and vessels are used to cook, store, serve and otherwise convey nourishment to ourselves and others. I draw our attention to one delightful verse from the 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 vessel, a good pot; he was a faithful and constant provider 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 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

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

survive. Why did Onesimus run away? Some have speculated he may have committed the 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 DO 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 by God the Potter Almighty through the grace of Jesus Christ 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."*

The sermon title is a bit of a stretch, but is inspired by both a president and a MMA fighter who were nicknamed "Useless." Our eighteenth president Ulysses S. Grant, one of only three presidents to graduate from a military academy (*a little known fact is that his real name was Hiram Ulysses Grant, no "S."* When nominated to the U.S. Military Academy by Congressman Thomas Hamer, the congressman mistakenly nominated him as Ulysses S. Grant, apparently confused with Grant's mother's maiden name of Simpson. The academy would not accept any name other than what was on the nomination form, so Hiram Ulysses Grant legally adopted the new name as his own ... Ulysses S. Grant). From an interesting little book *Presidents were Teenagers, Too*, author Ben Wasserman writes, *"He began attending school at age five in a one room school house; students ranged in age from five to twenty. He was by far the most intellectually able student at the little school, but the other children misread his long thoughtful and shy silences as a sign that he was mentally slow, and they nicknamed him 'Useless.'" Ulysses would prove himself to be anything BUT useless, especially in the fields of battle and national leadership. When serving as general during the Civil War, someone complained to President Lincoln that Grant drank too much. The president replied, "Tell me what he drinks so I can have all the other generals do the same! I cannot spare this man; he fights!" "Useless" is also the current stage name of mixed martial arts (MMA) international bantamweight gold medal champion Ulysses "Useless" Gomez. He was given the nickname "Useless" in school by friends who either couldn't pronounce his name or wanted to poke fun at him. Gomez somewhat facetiously and good naturedly adopted the nickname for his fighting career; it gave him the incentive to prove he was anything but! (*He is the younger brother of Herculez Gomez, who became a scoring champion in the top Mexican soccer league.*)*

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 redeem us, 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. 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.

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 Roman Coliseum. 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 it's highly likely the letter 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.