

God, THE POTTER ALMIGHTY

Sermon, September 4, 2022

Texts: Jeremiah 18:1-11; Philemon

*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 we 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 four times we've looked at this Jeremiah passage in the past twenty-five years or so, but the Apostles and Nicene Creeds, as Paul, Isaiah and Jeremiah may have worded it, might begin, *"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 (*not unlike an organist, all four limbs are simultaneously and vigorously involved in producing the work of art*). The potter would dig a clump of clay out of a crock, place it on the wheel, and begin kicking sideways with his feet as he would center the clay in his wet hands, the moisture oozing between his fingers. Slowly a pot or a vase 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 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."* 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 people, 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" is the same word used to describe 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 useful and treasured and beautiful vessels.

On our cross country trip back home from Washington State in 2016, Steve and I traveled through the beautiful lakeside town of Coeur d'Alene, Idaho; about thirty miles east of Spokane, Washington. The only time I had heard of Coeur d'Alene was from a story I had read years ago about some local residents who called the police complaining about a car driving around and around the neighborhood ... in reverse. Police came to the scene, saw the car going around the block in reverse 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 ... we can't undo things by going backward. If somehow driving around and around and around the block in reverse would expunge our record, I imagine all of us go out to the parking lot and rev up our engines! But we can't put the spinning wheel of our life in reverse. 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 our lives to shape us into useful and beautiful 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

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

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. And pots and vessels were not created just to be decorative items to be put on display on some shelf ... 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 pot, a good and godly vessel; 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 bondservant; 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 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 Christian 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*; for His good and holy purposes. 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 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, usually we are not the only ones being transformed and refreshed; it invariably involves and refreshes 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 himself as he is persuaded to graciously receive his bondservant back, not just as a bondservant, 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 of 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.