

DISCERNING OUR CONGREGATION'S FUTURE: LESSON'S LEARNED AT ELDRETH POTTERY ABOUT GOD'S POWER AND DESIRE TO MOLD US

Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson
Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA
September 9, 2001

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I'm finally back. I'm glad. I love this congregation. I appreciate Rev. Smart's ministry over the summer. I appreciate his words in the Lamplighter in which he expressed the desire for our future to be so bright that you'll need sunglasses. I want to talk to you about our future as a congregation. I'd like to lead this congregation over the next several years in a process of discerning our future - especially in the light of the celebration of our 250th anniversary in the year 2004.

I believe God, the Divine Potter, is molding us into the image of Christ. The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah. "Go to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So off he went. Last week I reenacted what Jeremiah did. I went to Eldreth Pottery and observed Emilio, the head potter, work his magic on lumps of clay. As I watched, I heard God speak about the future of our church. Jeremiah found the potter at his wheel making a clay pot. The clay was spoiled - but in the hands of the potter it was remade into something beautiful and useful. Then the Lord said. "Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done?"

Jeremiah was using a figure of speech. The house of Israel wasn't really a lump of clay, nor are we. We're magnificent human beings, created in God's image. We have wills. We can think, reason and sing. We aren't really lumps of clay but we are like clay pots in some ways. Jeremiah used this figure of speech in relation to national affairs. God was shaping the nation of Israel. And even though Israel was marred by disobedience, God planned to reshape Israel. I could apply Jeremiah's message to our nation but I don't want to do that today. I want to apply the figure of speech of the Divine Potter to our church and to ourselves. We are like clay pots in a number of ways.

1. Like clay pottery, we're all unique. I saw so much unique variety at Eldreth Pottery. Clay pottery can be very plain and simple or it can be so exquisite, so beautiful that a poet like John Keats can write an immortal poem to it. There's no single form, or style, or color in clay pottery. At Eldreth's I watched Emilio make one clay pitcher after another. They looked identical but upon closer observation I saw that each was

unique because each was hand made. God, the Divine Potter, has made each one of us unique. We share a common humanity. We're made of common clay, but we're all unique. We're God's handiwork - whether rich or poor, educated or uneducated, married, single, or divorced, fat or thin, male or female, conservative or liberal,

*red and yellow, black and white,
we are precious in God's sight.*

Like hand made clay pottery we're all unique.

2. *Like clay pottery, our lives are being shaped.* But unlike the hands of Emilio, *the hands that shape us* are unseen. We're shaped, as well, by many hidden forces. The news media shapes us. Our consumer culture shapes us when we walk through a shopping mall.

*Advertising signs that con you
Into thinking you're the one
That can do what's never been done
That can win what's never been won*

Advertising shapes us. Our lives are shaped, as well, by gender, economic status, education, race, culture, our families, not to speak of our genetic inheritance. Our lives are shaped by hidden forces we aren't aware of.

Christians, however, believe that these hidden forces are not the determining factors shaping us. Behind those hidden forces, is the hand of God. Whether we believe in theistic evolution - that God shaped us over millions of years - or whether in James Weldon Johnson's poetic rendering of Genesis 2 -

*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 His own image*

God is working in history to mold us into the image of his Son. *God is working in history* to bring about his purpose for creation. *God is working in history* to bring about his kingdom. Blind impersonal forces will not having the final say in shaping our destiny. The Divine Potter works, not apart from history, but in history, through all these hidden forces and people and events. The unseen hands of the Lord *shaped Israel* like a potter when he acted in history to rescue them from slavery in Egypt. He shaped and molded *the early Christians*

through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He shaped **the early church** through the painful controversies narrated in the book of Acts. The Divine Potter continues to shape us through historical events and personal experiences and above all through a life of discipleship shared with God's people participating in study, worship and service.

3. Like clay pots, we're fragile. Drop a clay pot and it breaks. Put clay pots too close together and they chip. We're very fragile. We're all so vulnerable to breaking. We experience brokenness all around us.

Broken vows.

*Broken bodies, broken bones,
Broken voices on broken phones.*

Our lives can be shattered in a moment. Our hearts broken. Some of you wonder if your broken heart can be put back together. Jeremiah tells us that human lives are like broken shards of pottery. **But God, the Divine Potter, gathers in his hands with infinite tenderness our broken hearts and mends them.** And as the Divine Potter mends the broken pottery of our lives I can hear him sing, singing to us -

*If your broken heart should need repair
Then (I'm the one) to see
I whisper sweet things, you tell all your friends
They'll come runnin' to me
Here is the main thing I want to say
I'm busy 24 hours a day
I fix broken hearts, I know that I truly can.*

4. Like clay pottery the Divine Potter makes us to be useful. Most clay pottery is made to be useful. I use an Eldreth teapot every morning. The chalice and plate on the communion table aren't there just for pretty. We use them. We fill them with bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ. Some pottery is just for decoration, but we don't really need more merely decorative Christians. We need disciples. God wants to use us in the service of Christ. God wants to fill us with himself. Fill us with his Spirit. Clay pottery must be fillable in order to be functional. God wants to get inside us. God comes with his Spirit and works his way into our consciousness and becomes God in us. The God who is *with us* and *for us* becomes the God who is *in us*. And when he's in us we become functional pottery for God's glory. **I don't understand the relationship between divine sovereignty and human response.** But I believe that God wants us to open our lives to him. This isn't

something that happens in a vacuum. It happens within the community of faith as we commit ourselves to worship and study and service. It involves discipline - discipleship, carrying a cross and following Christ.

Sometimes we don't feel useful. We feel worthless. There's a line in Francis Thompson's poem, *Hound of Heaven*, that echoes how we sometimes feel about ourselves. Thompson had run away from God, fled him until God caught him. And God said what Thompson felt:

*Of all man's clotted clay the dingiest clot...
whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee
Save me, save only me?*

Maybe you've felt that way - the dingiest clot of clay. If you have, know that God will *never* say that you are too dingy for his service. You may feel your life is purposeless. You come to church saying, "My life is too broken by tragedy or sin or illness. My family and upbringing, my genetic inheritance has dealt me a bad hand - I'm useless." Turn to God. Turn to Christ. Commit your life to be molded by the hand of the Divine Potter.

The Divine Potter is not someone to fear, but to love. God is love. Look at the face of the Divine Potter and see the face of Jesus Christ. **Look at the hands of** the Divine Potter. Strong hands. Gentle hands. Sensitive hands. The hands that want to shape us once **touched children** and blessed them, **touched lepers** and cleansed them, **touched deaf ears** and **blind eyes** and opened them, **touched the casket** of the widow's son and raised him. Look at the hands of the Divine Potter nailed to a Roman cross. His pierced and wounded hands long to mend and mold us, and make our dead clay come alive. Amen.

Let us pray. Merciful God, as a potter fashions a vessel from humble clay, you form us into a new creation. Shape us, day by day, through the cross of Christ your Son, until we pray as continually as we breathe and all our acts are prayer; through Jesus Christ and in the mystery of the Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.