

Melt Me, Mold Me, Fill Me, Use Me.

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on September 6, 1998.
Scripture lesson: Jeremiah 18:1-22; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33.

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

It was a perfectly familiar sight. Jeremiah had seen it many times. But today he paid attention to what he was seeing. What he saw came to him with the force of a revelation from God.

What was this thing he saw? He saw a potter working in his pottery shop. He saw the potter's wheel consisting of two stones on a vertical axis. The lower stone was kept revolving by the potter's feet. This turned the upper stone, on which rested the moist, plastic clay. And there, on the swiftly turning surface of the stone, the potter molded his clay vessel.

On this particular occasion when Jeremiah was observing, something went wrong. The potter wasn't satisfied with his work. The vase he was designing turned out not quite symmetrical - maybe because of some flaw in the material. And Jeremiah was intensely interested in what happened next. The man didn't set the imperfect article aside or throw it away. The clay was still soft and pliable. So he crushed it back into a shapeless lump, and started all over again, remolding it on his wheel. And this time his patience was rewarded by a vase of perfect form and symmetry. So he placed it in the furnace to fire and harden it and it came out a thing of beauty.

Then, suddenly, Jeremiah saw with prophetic insight why he had been led there that day. He saw what God was trying to show him. God was the potter. Israel was the clay. And the wheel, the furnace, and the tools the potter used to shape the pottery were the historical processes. God was using the historical process - the growing Babylonia menace that would, in a few short years, destroy the land of Judah and demolish the temple - to shape and mold and perfect his people. But what patience God needed! How often this raw material, this clay, his own chosen people, proved recalcitrant, obstinate, perversely ^{assistant} ~~resisting~~ to shaping and molding. "Throw the stuff away! It's useless!" - That would have been natural to say. But no. The

divine Potter would start again from the beginning. God would not fail nor be discouraged until his purpose was complete.

This is what Jeremiah learned standing there in the potter's workshop in Jerusalem. What Jeremiah saw is relevant to us today. Now I know that this analogy of God the potter and us, the clay, has its limitations. We can't press the metaphor too far. For one thing, the clay doesn't possess the power of making choices: we do. The clay can't consciously oppose the will of the potter but we can oppose the will of God. The clay can't feel the hand of the potter but many of us can testify that we have felt the hand of God upon us. So we can't press Jeremiah's metaphor ~~to~~^{too} far. But, still, the analogy is valid. It's graphic. It's meaningful.

For one thing, Jeremiah gives us a graphic reminder that we are utterly dependent upon God. We are not self made. "O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? says the Lord." A good bit of my higher education consisted of reading and studying great 19th century thinkers and shapers of modern history such as Freud. Many people in the 19th century had unbounded optimism and ~~Promethium~~^{Promethean} pride. There is a modern skepticism which claims to have demolished God, and abrogated the supernatural, and reduced religion to the level of a Freudian illusion. God, Sigmund Freud, wrote is our projection of a father figure on the universe. The universe, however, has no maker. We and all of history are simply the results of matter, time and chance. But Christians assert that God made us, and not we ourselves. Christians proclaim with prophetic zeal that the nation whose ultimate trust is in its own power and resources, or the scientific humanism whose final confidence is in itself, or the good man or woman who regards their righteous deeds as meritorious, or the Church that thinks of itself as a miniature Kingdom of God - all are guilty of the one fundamental sin of pride.

A second lesson Jeremiah teaches is that God has a plan for our lives and a plan for history. It's a good plan. There is purpose in history. History is not a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, and signifying nothing. History is going someplace. God is shaping history, molding history, guiding history.

A third lesson Jeremiah teaches: God disciplines us. Jeremiah looked at the implements of the potter's trade - the whirling wheel, the chisel, the file, and the scorching fire of the furnace and he suddenly saw, "That is how God makes human beings fulfill God's purpose." God often uses harsh discipline to accomplish his good purpose for our lives.

A fourth lesson: We can repudiate our destiny. We can resist God's will. We can reject God's purpose for our lives. "The vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter." So it is today when nations turn from the ideals of goodwill and cooperation to the paths of violence and aggression. So it is also, ethically, when a culture dissolves into a morass of moral relativism and where men and women despair of knowing the difference between right and wrong.

A fifth lesson: God is patient with our faults. Look at what the potter does. The potter might have thrown away the imperfect vessel of clay. He might have said, "This clay is bad: I can't make anything of it. I need to get some good clay." But what struck Jeremiah was that God started over again with the same material. He pressed the clay into a new lump. He placed it on the wheel once more. He told himself, "I can and I must and I will make something beautiful of this lump of clay." And he did.

That's how God is. Think of King David. He committed adultery with Bathsheba, a terrible abuse of his power. To cover up his sin, he sent Bathsheba's husband into a battle to be killed. David was as guilty of murder as he was of adultery. But Nathan the prophet ^{know} knew that David was lying. He confronted David with his sin. David suffered severely because of his sin, but God reshaped David into Israel's ideal king. Think again of Saul in the New Testament. Saul hated Christians. He persecuted them and was implicated in the murder of Stephen. But God got a hold of Saul and reshaped him and turned him into the apostle Paul who almost single handedly brought the Gospel to western Asia and Europe.

930 - Think of Erasmus - *crucifix*
Think of the Family: *God remakes*

Think again of President Clinton. The president has finally confessed to a terrible act of misuse of power and then lied to cover up his sin. A minister who did what he did would be

removed from his church immediately. And yet God can remake President Clinton and his presidency. We need to pray that God will deal with him as God dealt with King David or Paul.

At the heart of the Christian Gospel is the hope and faith that God is working out his purposes in history and that God is working out his purposes in the lives of individual men and women. The hands of the great Potter are shaping us. Perhaps some of us have felt the hand of God on our lives trying to shape us, trying to make something beautiful of our eyes, despite our imperfections. Pray that God's hands will be upon your life and upon the lives of your loved ones. Pray that God's hands would shape this church, the body of Christ, into a useful vessel that will bring life and hope to many people in the Oxford area.

MADE
Marred
Mended
