

“In Whose Hands?”
 Jeremiah 18:1-11
 Rev. David Hutchinson
 Sunday, September 8, 2019

Imagine that three kinds of souls make up all humanity:

Three types - - which can be described by the prayers they pray.

These three prayers are:

1. “I am a bow in your hands O God, draw me, lest I rot”
2. “Do not OVERdraw me Lord, because I’ll break”
3. “Overdraw me if you want, Lord, who cares if I break”

To put it another way:

Use me; don’t over-use me; or who cares *what* you do - - I’m yours

The image - - of these three kinds of souls comes from the autobiography of the author of *Zorba the Greek* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*: Nikos Kazantzakis. / It’s how he started his autobiography. / It’s how he saw the world.

And his three types get me thinking about - - me and God.

How am I at putting myself - - in God’s hands?

Would I ever - - say to God - - I’m in your hands - - even if you BREAK me - - I’m still in your hands - - do whatever you will do. / It’s an amazing thing to consider someone - - who is really willing to say that.

In this morning’s reading from the book of Jeremiah, the word of God comes to Jeremiah the prophet - - and what God says is - - “behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand.”

Putty in the hands of God.

Shaped by God into a beautiful creation.

That all seems pretty good to me - - at first.

But is it?

What do you think of the image of a powerful God who can break down at a whim? / Jeremiah says God pluck us up or destroys us at will! / If God WANTS to - - God can and is that powerful. / What do you think of that?

And what do you think God thinks - - of people who are soft passive lumps of mud, just waiting in hand? / How do you like that God?

What do you think of us now?

The problem with that kind of thinking is that it PITS us against God.

Which I think we do all the time.

Even our prayers to God to please help us assume something similar.

But what if that clay and the potter worked together?

Would that be possible?

There have been times in my life when I felt broken down.

Broken down - - and then built back up.

But it's not easy for me to think about it.

It's a struggle for me to think about putting myself - - in God's hands.

Saint Theresa of Avila was better at it than I am.

She once wrote this:

“Give me death - - give me life;

Health - - or sickness,

Honor - - or shame,

War - - or peace,

Weakness - - or full strength

Yes - - to ALL of these I say:

What do you want of me?"

Isn't that amazing!

Particularly the word "or"!

Health OR sickness; weakness OR full strength!!

What I learned from St. Theresa's words is this:

Putting ourselves in God's hands doesn't DEPEND on anything.

Like - - I'll put myself in God's hands IF - - I have time.

If - - I don't get sick.

If - - company from out of town doesn't choose that weekend.

Any time there is an IF - - it's not really putting yourself in God's hands.

So how does Jeremiah do it?

Jeremiah lived from about 625 BCE - - to 580.

So that means he lived THROUGH the destruction of the temple.

He lived through the fall of Jerusalem in 587.

He lived through the most DREADED time in the history of Israel.

He lived through a time when it FELT LIKE everything was being

BROKEN apart.

And as Jeremiah saw people being exiled from their homelands - -

- - to live in refugee camps - - he wrote this.

They WERE being broken down.

And Jeremiah said - - consider the possibility - - that we are being SHAPED.

What if - - we are not just being broken - - but being REMADE!

As I was preparing for this sermon, and reading Jeremiah, I came across a book on pottery. / I skimmed through it not expecting much - - but since I was reading Jeremiah's words about the potter - - I thought - - what the heck! / This book is called, "*How To Make Pottery*" from the 1960s - - and it was in the discard pile at the library.

Amazingly - - helpful - - it was.

In the introduction it says this:

"Today's antique - - was once someone's dream - - brought to life by a pair of loving hands. / Many such creations will become the treasures of tomorrow."

The second chapter of the book is called: "How to Make Clay Behave"

That caught my attention!

Mostly because I'm a fan of Mike Meyers as his Austin Powers character.

I imagined him as a potter talking to his clay - - telling it to "behave".

But - - as sad as THAT is - - it got me to read more!

And I was NOT disappointed.

According to chapter two:

"It is essential that the student have a knowledge of different types of clay and what these clays will or will not do. / Once the student learns the characteristics of the clay, he will find it easy to work with it - - instead of against it. / Then he will get the best results."

Did you catch that?

The potter - - needs to know what the clay is capable of.

And then the potter and the clay work together!

Do you think - - that God - - knows what we are capable of?

I wonder.

Do you think it's more than YOU think you are capable of?

Going on in chapter two - - the one on making clay behave, I read:

“Some students find great satisfaction in digging from the earth the clay for their creations. / To be completely responsible for the transformation from this humble material - - into an object of beauty and utility - - is a special joy - - known only to those who have done it.”

“Clay is decomposed rock. / There is an abundance of it all over the earth. One may be fortunate to find it in one's own backyard. / To test whether it is clay, pick up a bit of it when wet. / If it is sticky enough to form a ball - - it is clay.”

“You process clay by removing impurities. / Breaking up chunks.”

The book even suggests putting the chunks through a meat grinder to prepare them! / Now we're talking! /

Jeremiah - - knew what the people had been through.

To some of them it seemed like meat grinder!

But to Jeremiah - - it was PREPARATION!

God's work - - in the midst of their struggle - - to begin preparing them.

Preparing them for WHAT you might ask?

Well - - what is the potter preparing the backyard MUD for?

TO BECOME CLAY!

To prepare - - to be clay - - in the hands of the potter.

To prepare to be clay - - that - - BEHAVES!

Well back to the book on clay...

After the dirt and mud is ground up and impurities are all out - -

- - then WATER - - does the rest of the work.

Water makes what is called "slip". / And the slip - - becomes clay.

And of course - - I thought - - of the water of baptism.

Making us - - giving birth to us.

Out of the dirt - - like Adam - - and Eve.

What the book helped me to see - - is that there is a long process of preparation.

God doesn't just pick us up one day and mold us into a beautiful vase.

It takes time.

AND - - that time - - and all its challenges - - prepare us - - to BE CLAY.

And maybe by THAT time - - we are ready to say:

"I'm in your hands - - *no matter what* God - - who cares!"

And - - consider this: I learned to see THAT - - from a book that was on the DISCARD pile in the library! / A book that God chose - - to USE - - to get my attention!

God will use anything!

God will use even DIRT!

But even dirt - - has to be prepared - - and willing - - to be fully in God's hands.

We are in the VERY SKILLED hands of the potter.

Our lives are in God's hands and God will shape us.

I'm not sure which requires the most trust: doing our OWN thing - - or placing our lives in God's hands. / But the image of a potter - - is about trust - - in part.

Trust to be molded.

Trust to be broken and remade.

Trust to repent and change.

But maybe - - just maybe - - it's not as difficult as it first seems.

Maybe we need to just place ourselves there.

As the wisdom of Charlie Brown confirms:

In the Peanuts cartoon Sally says to Charlie, "I'm DOOMED!"

"I'm doomed - - I have to write a report on rivers - - and it's due next week - - and I just KNOW I'll get a failing grade."

Charlie Brown suggests, "Why don't you just work real hard, and turn in the best report you can possibly write?"

Sally thinks about it and says: "That never occurred to me!"

All month we will be reading from the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah. / He has been described by one commentator as the "Prophet of DOOM, Prophet of HOPE" - - suggesting that the DOOM and HOPE go together. / I think they do.

Jeremiah rails against what is wrong and tells it like it is.

He predicts doom. / But NOT because he WANTS doom.

Instead - - it's because he wants CHANGE.

Jeremiah is a wake-up call.

DOOM - - IS - - the CLAY of HOPE.

Doom is that clay - - formed by the hands of God - - into lives of hope.

May it be so - - for you and for me. / Amen.