

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
October 24, 2021
Jeremiah 18:1–6

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Living and loving God, help us so to hear your holy Word that we may truly understand; that, understanding, we may believe, and, believing, we may follow in all faithfulness and obedience, seeking your honor and glory in all that we do; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²“Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” ³ So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴ The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

⁵ Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁶ Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

When the Gifts and Gratitude committee selected these verses from Jeremiah about the potter and clay as the theme for this year, I thought it was spot on that this scripture would speak to where we are and how God works with us. The image of the potter at the wheel molding and shaping clay into a useful and, perhaps, beautiful, vessel is a wonderful image. The image of potter and pottery is used frequently in scripture. The prophet Jeremiah, like Jesus, often used images of ordinary things to talk about God and God’s people.

This imagery also shows up in the hymns and songs we sing in worship. The hymn, “Have Thine Own Way,” says “mold me and make me after

thy will.” The hymn, “Spirit of the Living God,” has the lyrics “Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.” Each of those describes the divine and human relationship on the individual level where we ask God to shape us and mold us in the way that God would have us be.

In this passage from Jeremiah, God is the potter, and the people of Israel are the clay. This is not an individual call, but a framework and metaphor for the whole community. God cannot only shape our individual lives, but also is meant to shape the community of faith. It is in the context of the covenantal relationship with God and the people. With the idea that the community of faith is to be a representation of God’s justice, mercy, and love on earth. That the shape of how we live, work, play, and worship with one another would be reflective of God. Would be God-shaped.

When I was in high school, I spent my senior year in a sculpture and pottery class. It was there that I learned how to throw a clay pot on a pottery wheel. There is more to it than it looks. Before the potter is able to begin to shape the clay on the wheel as it spins, first the clay needs to be prepared. If the clay is not prepared well, disaster can strike when whatever the potter has thrown on the wheel is fired in the oven or kiln. If there is even the tiniest of air bubbles in the clay, when the creation is being fired in the oven, as the oven gets hotter and hotter, the air bubble inside the clay will expand and eventually pop so that it breaks the creation. There is always a nervous moment when the kiln is opened after the works have been fired to see if anything exploded, or if they all managed to survive.

To prepare the clay, the potter will slam and knead the mass of clay, like bread dough. To work out all the air pockets. It takes a good deal of strength, and it isn’t a gentle process. Once the clay is ready, the potter

then must center the clay on the wheel as best as possible so that as they shape whatever they are making, as they raise the clay up on the wheel it remains stable. If the clay is off center, it will fall over or become off-kilter. The potter won't be able to work with it and the pot will be ruined. This is what is alluded to in the scripture from Jeremiah. At some point, the vessel will become spoiled right in the hands of the potter.

Even when the potter has centered the mass of clay properly, so that it is even, there is the possibility that the vessel could still fall. It is a delicate balance of the potter shaping the clay and pushing the clay beyond its limits. There is a dynamic between the clay and the potter – where the potter must be attentive to the clay as it is shaped. If they are not attentive, if they push the clay too far, it could fall and become ruined. There is nothing to do but to start over and try again.

I love this image in Jeremiah, not just because I enjoyed working with clay in high school, but because it demonstrates so much about the relationship God has with us as a community of faith.

I believe God is deeply invested in us in our common life. As one writer says, “The potter does not work aimlessly, nor does God. Every turn of the wheel matters. God means to shape us for purposes that often exceed our vision and imagination.”²¹ God is not indifferent to how our lives are shaped.

And sometimes that process of shaping or preparing to shape us is not gentle. Sometimes it might feel like we are being kneaded like bread dough. Sometimes as we are being shaped, we may be pushed a little too far, and maybe we fall apart a little. But the potter can take that and start again. Can coax a new thing from us. Can re-shape and re-make us. If we have learned anything over the last several months, it is that we can be re-created. That new ways can be made. And sometimes, when there are those failures, or when there are mistakes, or when we are pushed to

be shaped in different ways, in ways we have never been before, well sometimes that produces something we didn't expect, and maybe even a better creation than we knew before.

And there are also those moments of no return, where the future shape of the creation, of the pot, is set. Where the potter is working the clay and in the process of raising the clay from the wheel where the shape of the thing being created cannot be anything other than the shape that it is. Where there is not turning back, and the future is set. Where the only way to have a different shape would be to start over altogether. There are those moments in our lives, both individually and communally, where our future is cast, where the shape of who we are is who we are because of choices and decisions that we have made.

But, fundamentally, one of the most compelling aspects of this image of the potter and clay for me is that it is indeed a relationship between the potter and the clay to create something. As I mentioned before, the potter must pay attention to the clay, and sometimes based on the characteristics of the clay, the potter will need to shape the clay into something that maybe the potter didn't recognize at first. The thing that results is really a co-creation between the potter and the clay.

This I think is also what it is to be a community of faith called by God. We are co-creators with God in the world. I think God is continually in the world with us, shaping, molding, coaxing us into something beautiful that displays the grace, love, mercy, and justice in the world. We do this together with God. In our imperfect selves, God takes all that we are and all that we have and uses that to continue to create.

And this co-creation is sometimes messy, and I love that too about this image. If you have ever worked with clay on a potter's wheel, you know it is impossible to do it without creating a mess of some kind. Your hands, your feet, sometimes your hair gets dirty. Clay is everywhere. As

I mentioned last week, we have a God willing to get God's hands dirty, to get in the muck with us. Whether it is as the Good Shepherd, or if it is the potter. Participating with God, being co-creators with God is messy work and requires us to get our hands dirty. It can be risky, and sometimes we might fail, but we can start again and try again. God can reshape the clay with us and continue to create. Whenever the potter steps away from the wheel, they are covered in the stuff of their art, usually from head to toe. "Jeremiah invites us to envision God up to the elbows in our making and remaking."

For the past few weeks, you have heard from several folks as we have been talking about our financial stewardship of this community. But hopefully, you have heard more than just people talk about money. I hope you have also heard about the love and support that people have gotten in communities of faith like Oak Grove Presbyterian Church. The compassion that is displayed and encouraged by this church. A community where we get to express our fears, our disappointments, our concerns. Where we get to raise our voices against injustice and hope and pray for a better world. But not only hope and pray, but where we can get a little messy and actively engage our faith and work toward justice. A community where we cry with one another, comfort one another, laugh with one another, serve with one another, and worship with one another. The testimonies that you have heard these last couple of weeks are about the importance of this community, to those within it, and to the world we serve.

In a few moments, we will have an opportunity to make pledges for next year, not just as a financial contribution, but as an image of our whole selves, as an extension of our spiritual selves. Many of you have pledged already, and I thank you for that.

I recognize this act is not a simple thing. My hope is that you have spent time in prayer and discernment about what makes sense for you. This is a personal decision, and no one will ask you what you have pledged. This is not a decision that should be made begrudgingly, or out of a sense of duty, or coercion. Rather, I encourage you to think about your decision to give out of a sense of gratitude and connectedness.

Kelly and I, many years ago, set a goal of giving a tithe of our income, or 10% of our income. This comes from scripture, particularly in the Old Testament, where people brought a tenth of their harvest to the storehouse to care for the needy or in case of emergency.

I don't expect that everyone is able to tithe, to give ten percent. Maybe there are some of you who are already doing this, and maybe some of you are giving more than 10 percent. But I do know that it's helpful to start somewhere. When Kelly and I first were married, we didn't give anywhere near a tithe. We were newly married, I was a student, and we were on a tight budget. But we started, we committed a particular percentage to give to our church. And gradually we were able to continually increase our giving.

It took us time to achieve our goal. Each year we gradually increased our giving to move toward attaining that goal. We were able to meet that goal of tithing our income a number of years back. Once we reached that goal, we changed our goal to give over and above our tithe.

We now tithe to our church community. The majority of our giving from our income is what we give to the church, to Oak Grove. We also give to other charities; this is what is in our giving above our tithe. Again, it took many years for us to make it to the goal of being able to tithe, and to give beyond a tithe. We plan to increase our pledge again this year.

Again, I don't expect that everyone is able to tithe, to give ten percent. If you can't do this, start somewhere. Try three percent, four percent, or maybe five or even six percent. Start somewhere. This is not a rule, but as a response of gratitude for God, an act of worship.

Kelly and I give because we are grateful to God, and we are grateful that we have a particular faith community.

Because we belong to God, and to one another, we give to God that which is God, namely ourselves. We take this sacred covenant between us and God, and we give our lives back to God, in our worship and our work. I believe, the church, and specifically churches like Oak Grove are needed now more than ever.

I am glad that I am a part of a community that gets to live out its life together. I am proud to serve and give to a church like Oak Grove. A church that has a vision for what church and the world should be.

That isn't afraid to voice its fears, its frustrations, A place where we can work toward justice and equity. Oak Grove is a place where the broken hearted can have their heart broken open rather than apart, where we can take our pain and work it into joy, together. Oak Grove is a place where we can experience the love of God through the love of others and know that the other is welcome. Oak Grove is a place where we can be assured that God is for us, all of us.

Oak Grove is a place where all can belong to the people of God, the body of Christ. Here, we share in a communal life with the people of God as representative of God's body in the world. We are a living and breathing body called together and claimed by God. Imperfect and messy as it is.

ⁱ Sally Brown, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4, page 29.