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# “Thus Saith the Lord: I Can Reshape You”

A SERMON on Jeremiah 18:1-11 for the 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C  
Preached 4 September 2022 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister  
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I remember being at a meeting a couple of years before the pandemic. On the table in front of each of us were small, crayon-sized sticks of clay. For the “ice-breaker” at this meeting, we were asked to take a few minutes to construct a “symbol” of some sort that somehow represented ourselves as individuals. Mine was a little pair of wireframe glasses—not so much because I wear glasses; rather I made them because I hope that one of the things I bring to the table in a group is being able to clarify and help see what is most important.

True confession, though... I also chose to make glasses because they required very little in the way of actual artistic skill with the clay. The lenses were just the premade clay sticks bent around into circles, and the bows were just the sticks themselves, as they came, stuck onto the side of the lens circles.

Perhaps I was being lazy. Or, perhaps I was being an inventive and effective *steward* of my limited abilities in the visual and manual arts.... I’ll let others be the judge!

Although *my* clay skills have never gone far enough to land me behind an actual potter’s wheel, I nevertheless have always found the process fascinating to watch. As a wet gray lump sits spinning and spinning on the wheel, just the most innocent of presses with a thumb, and suddenly we have a cavity where formerly there was none. A press of the finger, and that vase spinning away has shifted—shorter, taller, thinner, fatter. A ridge emerges where one hadn’t been, a flare is tempered into just the right swoop. Whether I’m watching this work and artistry in-person or on a video screen, it all seems to happen so *effortlessly*—practically like magic.

Of course, I know it’s not magic. And... if *I* were to try to sit down right now at the wheel and try to make an artful vase or functional bowl emerge, I’m sure I quickly learn that it isn’t effortless, either.

It *is* always a work in progress, though. Until that clay goes into the fire, into the kiln or oven, there’s *always* the opportunity to reshape it—to revisit its contours and structures, even to rethrow it entirely: the same clay, started over again, for something new and different.

*That’s* what God invited Jeremiah to go down to the potter’s house to see. Not simply to admire the potter’s craft, or to marvel at how effortlessly the shapes seem to emerge. No, when Jeremiah showed up, what he got to witness was what happened when the vessel being worked on was spoiled.

“And [the potter]” we have heard, “reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.”

You see, such is the way God works. From the very first days of creation, God’s hand—glistening with the waters of grace and love and creativity—has been at work shaping and reshaping the stuff of life. Never satisfied with mere lumps on the wheel that cannot hold the richness and abundance of life that God knows us capable of bearing, God never gives up, always seeking to form and mould an ever-more-perfect vessel for the elixir of life and love.

Jeremiah stood watch as the potter took a work-in-progress that had become spoiled—a lump that had grown lopsided, a mass that was shaping up into something incapable of doing the job intended for it... Jeremiah watched as the potter remade it into something new and good.

Reshaping a work on the wheel already in progress sometimes means taking down what already has formed—pushing open a vessel that is already forming, taking down a structure that is already standing. And what’s true on the potter’s wheel is true in the creative studio of God’s

work as well. It is not always possible for God's life-giving and life-bearing structures to take shape *in us* without taking down some of the deformed and misshapen things that have already emerged in us. In fact, sometimes to fix one part of the creation, another part that had seemed o.k. even has to get redone in the process. The bowl of the chalice may be the part that isn't up to snuff, but sometimes to re-sculpt the bowl into what's needed, the stem and the base end up having to get redone as well.

Such transformation can seem disappointing, painful, even scary. "Hey," you may think; "I spent hours getting that stem just right." But in order for the *whole* of the work to take proper shape, sometimes everything a piece that seemed like it was already fine has to change, too.

But here's the thing, my friends. The forms and shapes that a piece of clay takes on the potter's wheel, they may have to change—they may get remoulded, even smashed down in order to begin the process over. But *the clay itself, it* doesn't get thrown out. A potter *never* wastes clay. If something is shaping up to not be what it needs to be, the potter doesn't just throw the whole lump away, convinced that nothing good could ever emerge from it. The potter may very well have to take down structures that have already been built up, remake forms that have already taken shape. But the potter does not reject the clay itself. There is always possibility, always new potential, no matter what has already established itself. No piece is totally beyond reworking, even if reworking means ruining something already made.

Such handiwork of the potter has been God's way from the very beginning. In one of the narratives we tell in our faith tradition to give meaning to where the whole creation has come from, God takes the stuff of earth, a lifeless lump of mud and clay, and shapes it and moulds it and breathes the breath of life into it. That is the way the story speaks of the creation of humanity—the stuff of the earth filled with the breath of the divine. But as we all know, human life and human community all too readily take on shapes and forms that *don't* bear all the abundance of life truly possible for us. And so the hand of God stands ready at the wheel, reshaping and reforming, sometimes having to break down what-has-been in order to bring about what-can-be. Such remaking can seem like judgment—and, in fact, it *is*: judgment *against* our misshapen forms and lopsided structures. But it's also judgment *for*: judgment *for* our fuller potential, judgment *in favour* of us becoming all that we are capable of. It's the judgment *against* being satisfied with the malformed project that becomes little more than an ugly paperweight we pawn off at the tag sale. And it's the judgment *for* the beautiful vessel of life we were intended for and are capable of being—the prized possession that gets handed down from generation to generation.

God's hand may at times be the hand of judgment. But my friends, it is the sort of judgment that is, in itself, *grace*.

Let us, therefore, *rejoice* that God has not given up on these lumps of clay yet. Let us *rejoice* that the hand of God is still at work, pressing and pushing, sculpting and shaping so that something yet-*more*-good can still emerge. Let us rejoice in the care and artistry of God, never satisfied with disfigured structures that prevent us from embodying the beauty, light, and love God has planned for us. Let us *rejoice* in the work of the potter who has cared so much for their clay that they've dared to *become* clay so that *we* might have the chance to fully express the potter's heart and will.

*Blessing and honour, glory and power be unto God, now and forever. Amen.*