

On the Potter's Wheel
Sermon by Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Jeremiah 18:1-11
Luke 2:41-52

Long before Jesus spoke his parables to bring lofty spiritual ideals to an understandable, earthy level that people could wrap their minds around, The Lord God spoke to the prophet Jeremiah. "Come," the Lord beckoned, "Go down to the potter's house." Now, I imagine that in the time of Jeremiah, every listener would have been to a potter's house. Far before the days of Target, there was the local potter. Not a thing would have been cooked or stored without the everyday use of pottery. So, to use the metaphor of clay on the potter's wheel for Israel's relation to God—well, perhaps there would have been no more concrete way of bringing the message home to those who needed to listen.

Several years ago, I used this passage as a study with a small group of teenagers I led in church. One of the volunteer youth advisors was an art teacher at the local high school, so she let us come over to the school's pottery studio. Some kids had thrown clay before and were pretty good at it. For others-- including myself-- it was the first time handling clay on a wheel.

Whether we were experienced or novice, the muddying of our hands while forming the clay on the spinning wheel gave us a sense of wonder as we considered God at work on us. We noted how easily a well-formed pot can crumble if you do not supply it with enough water. When we tightened the pressure on a part of the pot, that part would curve inward. If the clay did not begin centered squarely on the wheel, the pot would become lopsided and wobble over.

These were important lessons to discuss with teenagers who face intense pressures. We talked about what it takes to stay centered in the rat race of school, in an area that had drug use of twice the national average-- something even our church kids weren't exempt from. We talked about the impact of pressure, including pressure for achievement, pressure for affirmation from peers, and pressure to make parents proud. Sometimes this pressure was helpful, and led to greater flourishing. Sometimes the pressure ended up being crushing. We talked about baptism, and how tending our spiritual lives activates the waters of the sacrament and can help keep us from crumbling. We talked about the truth that sometimes a pot does fall over or collapses into itself-- in fact, we ended up glazing and firing some of those pottery fails and putting them on the communion table for worship as an honest display of our flawed humanity.

I like to think this message helped the church's youth, like Miriam, who was on track to be valedictorian of her senior class. Not only was Miriam great at academics, she had also stood out in her school of 4,000 students in theater, debate, vocal performance and synchronized swimming. Miriam was a delight of our youth group, an elected leader of them. She seemed like she had it all. However, a series of events that happened the fall of her senior year sent her into a deep depression. Her parents, who had also struggled with depression, could see this was not something she could just "snap out of." Miriam's depression threatened her life. It was time to stop the wheel for a spell so Miriam could re-center; her life was more important than making valedictorian.

She ended up taking a leave of absence and got care in a psychiatric hospital. When she was ready to return to high school for the spring semester, she approached the church to give her a ceremony of blessing before she returned to the place that had given her both great joy and tremendous anxiety. Her confirmation mentor, two of her Sunday School teachers, two youth advisors, her parents and her grandmother, a handful of teenage peers, and her ministers gathered round her and named the

gifts we saw that God had put in her. We laid hands and prayed over her. When she set foot through those high school doors, she knew she did not walk alone. Her church walked with her. Many years later, she has grown into a remarkable and resilient woman-- and she knows God's love restores, renews and upholds her.

In Jeremiah, God acknowledges that sometimes the potter makes a flawed piece. The metaphor in the scripture speaks specifically to the people of Israel. God had made a covenant with them, but the people had broken it-- like clay that spoils in the potter's hand. God's response to them is a threat to the assumption of divine protection, a threat to the certainty that God will always favor Israel above all others and keep them from all harm.

What God offers is a chance for repentance. In Hebrew, the word for repentance is *shubu*, and it is the word God uses in Jeremiah. *Shubu* means "Turn back." In other words, get back on the wheel and allow for God's reworking, God's restoration. As long as we allow ourselves to be in God's hands, to be participants in God's reworking of us, we do not stop with the failures and flaws that inevitably we will exhibit.

Chris and I have been watching a show on Netflix called *The Get Down*. It is a fictional telling of the advent of the hip-hop movement, and it takes place in the late 1970's Bronx. The show's title, *The Get Down*, alludes to the sweet spot on a record album that a DJ must find, where the DJ can spin the record back and forth on the turntable with an electrifying result as key lyrics and beats are repeated.

For those of us who are teachers and learners, we have had those electrifying moments where breakthroughs are made, where learning becomes less about absorbing information and more about a transformation that gives us our lives meaning and rhythm. We can tell the boy Jesus finds himself in one of these electrifying moments when he sat absorbed among the teachers of the temple. Even when we are beyond

school, we know we are living into the vocation to which God calls us if we have moments when we have such passion for what we do. This Labor Day weekend, we pray for all to have available work that is good and meaningful work. We pray for finding that place where, as Frederick Buechner defines vocation, “your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” We pray that our work be paid fairly, and that we pay others fairly, and that we have Sabbath rest when our work is done-- whether at the end of the day, or at the end of a career, or in those moments when we need to be off the wheel for a restorative time.

In taking us to the Potter’s house, Jeremiah makes physical the redemptive work of God, in the form of a lump of clay, a spinning wheel, and muddied hands. A sacrament is a physical sign of an invisible grace. A sacrament embodies something too profound for the mind alone to perceive. As we prepare to be fed by bread and grape, we consider how the communion meal may also be a redemptive moment on the spinning wheel, the moment of the “get down,” that allows us to turn back towards God and live lives that are electrifying in their rhythm and purpose. Amen.