

“More Than The Sand”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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There is an anecdotal story of a conversation between the artist Michaelangelo and the Pope. I’m not sure whether it is true or not, but its meaning speaks to today’s text. When Michelangelo was asked by the pope about the secret of his genius, particularly in regards to the statue of David, largely considered to be the greatest sculpting masterpiece of all time. Michelangelo responded by saying, **“It’s simple. I just remove everything that is not David.”**

Imagine that there is a masterpiece within each of us, and that our lives are a process of refining formation, to unearth the beauty that is inside. The teachers and classes that polish us with knowledge, the challenges and losses that cut away at us, the very minerals that make us up in the first place: each has a role in the revelation of who we are called to be:

“Fearfully and wonderfully made,” the Psalmist describes her being as she praises the God who formed her.

Jeremiah prophesied how God’s work with us is like a potter at a wheel, and a lump of clay:

“Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. 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.

I know a woman who is a potter. Her name is Pennie. She’s an artist who made all the communion ware in my former church, and she also taught ceramics at the high school in that town. I loved watching her at her wheel: how she would throw a lifeless lump of clay onto her wheel. She would set the wheel in motion. And then, through the coaxing of her hands, something beautiful or useful– Pennie’s pots were usually both beautiful **and** useful– a vase, a chalice, a bowl. With just the slightest movement of her hand or the pinch of her fingers, the walls would grow narrower or curve at the center.

If the clay doesn’t respond as Pennie wants, she coats her hands in water, to make the clay more pliant and supple. I’ve also seen a pot collapse beneath Pennie’s hands: walls to a tall vase come caving in. But she is a master, and can rework it into something new. And she can do that with teenagers too, which is why I enlisted her as an adult advisor to our church’s youth group. Our kids loved the young adults who would volunteer with them. But they had a special connection with Pennie, who was much older, and quiet. They would trust Pennie to tell her things they didn’t tell their pastor, presenting their lives as an ugly lump of clay. Pennie would spin them around until they could see just how beautiful and wonderful they are.

“Show me how,” I told Pennie one day. “Let me try.” For several years I had attended something called the Empty Bowls Project. Under Pennie’s direction, her ceramics students at the high school formed, glazed, and fired hundreds of ceramic bowls. Then they invited the community to come to a soup dinner at school. For \$50, people could buy a bowl of soup, served in a bowl, handmade by a student artist. They could keep the bowl. And then, the proceeds from the dinner went to Beyond Hunger, the local organization that tackles food insecurity in the community. Through that program, I saw how art became not only beautiful and useful, but also a tool for justice. “Sign me up!” I thought.

So I went to Pennie’s art studio. And Pennie is an amazing teacher. She showed me all kinds of useful things I needed to know to throw a pot: how to cut the clay, how to center it on the wheel, how to have the right level of moisture on my fingers, how to time the speed of the wheel with the pressure of my hands to get the clay to move how I wanted it to.

But as much as Pennie showed me all the *right* things to do, at the end of the day, what I had really learned from the potter’s studio is how to *fail*. After all, I only had a few hours of instruction and time at the wheel, unlike the students who spend months if not years in Pennie’s studio and make beautiful bowls. Throwing pottery is not as easy as a master artist makes it look! And so, I learned how a lump of clay that isn’t well-centered makes a lopsided vessel. I learned that if I have a crack in the wall of my clay, that trying to stretch the wall to close the gap sometimes thins the piece out so much that the vessel can no longer hold together at all. I learned that overworking the clay makes it brittle. I learned a bigger appreciation for the hands and artistry that made the bowls out of which I ate my soup, and from which the church serves its communion wine.

The physicality of seeing what happens to the clay when it begins off-center on the wheel and starts to wobble teaches me something about what happens in my life when I am off-center—and that taking the time to do what I need to find my center again is better than plowing through. I learned that if I become stretched too thin, I will not hold together. If I get overworked, I become brittle to those around me. Failure teaches us some things, doesn’t it? The writer Wendy Mogel wrote two books— one is called *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee: Raising Self-Reliant Children* and *The Blessing of a B Minus: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Resilient Teenagers*. Both books use the author’s Jewish background to show how it’s the failures and the fractures more than it is the dazzling achievements that can teach children and youth what they need to learn to become people with integrity and compassion and the ability to pick themselves up and start again after something goes wrong.

That’s a relief, because according to the vision Jeremiah saw of the potter at the wheel, things weren’t going well with the clay. The prophet goes on to say that Israel *is* that flawed lump of clay, and God is the potter. 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.

There is something comforting to know that our redemption rests in God's hands. Because there are times when I am left awake at night, and I am spinning, spinning, spinning— as if it can be *my* thoughts that can heal my troubles and those of the world.

But really it is at God's call that we are turned and we are shaped. It is at God's hands that we are redeemed. Yes, that shaping requires our responsiveness. Will we be supple? Will we be pliant? Do we want to be turned and fashioned into something new? But it is God who sets the wheel turning. And God's hands that can bring forth beauty, functionality, and justice— and also rest.

For those of us who are teachers and learners, we have had those electrifying moments when our hard work reveals something beautiful within us. We have seen where breakthroughs are made, where learning becomes less about absorbing information and more about a transformation that gives us our lives meaning and rhythm. 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 through our contributions to work, to church, to family, or to our community. 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.

I took some time off yesterday for sabbath and spent the day at the beach. We were at Sandy Hook, a very narrow strip of land that stretches out into the water. On one side of the land, there is the Atlantic Ocean. On the other side, there is the Sandy Hook Bay, which meant we had two options for our recreation— to be tossed in the churning waves of the Atlantic, or to relax in the calm waters of the bay. We chose the bayside, and set camp on its narrow beach.

When we looked to the farthest limits of the sea, we could see gigantic shipping barges heading into New York Harbor. When we looked a little closer, we saw the outlived shells of horseshoe crabs, who had discarded their smaller shells each time they grew a new, larger shell for their bodies. It reminds me of back-to-school shopping for a child who has outgrown last year's clothes. When we looked much closer, we could see the tiny grains of sand. It's amazing to think that God's love and care extends— farther than any of the countries those shipping barges heading into New York Harbor were coming from. But it also comes very near to us, closer than the tiniest grain of sand.

If we were to examine sand in a microscope, we would see tiny rocks. I learned that in Northern NJ, the rock minerals found in our sand are mostly quartz— that's the lighter, clear grains of

sand— and granite, which are the darker pieces of sand. In the time of the dinosaurs, these bits of sand once were part of Appalachian mountains, that over millions of years have flattened into the sea. In addition to the tiny rocks in sand, there are also tiny pieces of crushed up shells and other organic matter that have been tossed and tumbled by the sea.

The shape of Sandy Hook has changed over the years, according to storms and currents causing shifting sand. It is a peninsula right now, but there was a time when water cut Sandy Hook's connection to the mainland to make it an island.

That's a wonder of the ever-changing landscape of God's creation. A shell once that provided a home for a crab or clam can, many years later over time, become crushed into a million grains of sand. A mountain that was the grandmother of mountains crumbles into the sea, forming its floor and also its sandy beaches. The sand that makes the foundation for a beach peninsula provides protection from storm and seawater for a whole city of people. The people in the city then come to the beach, to enjoy the sand and a time of rest from what the city offers.

Like the mountains and the sands, like the lump of clay at the potter's wheel, God is constantly forming and re-forming us. God is as distant as the countries from which the shipping barge came. But God is also as close as the sand you found clinging to your toes at the end of a day on the beach. What an artist God is. And each of us, a work in progress.