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The Prophet Jeremiah
VII. Like Clay in the Potter's Hands
Jeremiah 18:1-12

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Jeremiah's mission was not going well. I mean, he was faithfully carrying out the mission God had given him – calling Israel to turn away from their sin and to turn back to their God. So, in that sense, Jeremiah's mission was right on track. But, nonetheless, Jeremiah's proclamation of the Word of God was not at all producing the desired results. The people were not turning back to God – if anything, they were only rushing even more headlong into their sins against God.¹ And not only that, but also the people were beginning to turn against Jeremiah personally – and Jeremiah was feeling the strain. Six times in Jeremiah's story, we overhear the prophet complaining to God about all of this – Israel's failure to repent and their growing persecution of Jeremiah himself. Jeremiah does not suffer in silence!

The fourth of these complaints occurs right before our passage this morning, back in the middle of chapter seventeen. And all the elements of Jeremiah's unhappiness are present there. There is his complaint that Israel isn't listening to him: *"Behold, they say to me, 'Where is this word of the Lord? Let it come!'"*² There is his protest that despite his doing everything God has asked him to do – *"I have not run away from being your shepherd . . . You heard what came out of my lips"*³ – despite that, or rather because of that, the people are turning against him personally: *"Let them be put to shame who persecute me."*⁴ But most important of all, for our passage, is Jeremiah's statement that he is ready, even double-ready, for God just to go ahead and smote these sinners and be done with it: *"Bring upon them thy day of destruction; destroy them with double destruction!"*⁵

And it is in answer to this last plea that God decides to send Jeremiah to the potter's house: *"Arise, and go down to the potter's house."* I can't imagine how Jeremiah must have received that instruction – he's dealing with life and death here, and God sends him to go watch someone making pots! But whatever doubts he might have had, God's promise surely is what finally compels him to go: *"There I will let you hear my words."* So whatever answer God has to make to Jeremiah's latest complaint, Jeremiah is going to have to go down to the potter's house in order to hear it. *"So,"* writes Jeremiah, *"I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel."*

As Jeremiah watches, the potter is shaping a vessel both functional and beautiful – but at the last moment something goes wrong. The clay frustrates the potter's plan, indeed frustrates the potter's skill. And so he takes the flawed pot and smashes it back down into an unshapen lump of clay – that rebellious clay which has frustrated the potter's plan and skill. But as Jeremiah watches, the potter doesn't then toss the lump of clay into the trash bin, but instead he puts it back on his

wheel. Puts it back on his wheel and begins reshaping it into a new vessel – this one even better and more beautiful than the one before. In the potter’s hand, the rebellious clay is made over, made new, shaped into something beautiful and useful. And then, with Jeremiah having seen all of this, then God speaks to Jeremiah the promised answer to his complaint:

Then the word of the Lord came to me: “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the Lord. Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.”

That word is, first of all, a statement of God’s sovereignty over His people Israel – indeed, a statement of God’s sovereignty over all peoples, over all the world He has made. The Divine Potter will have His way in the end. God is in control, such that in the end God’s will shall be done. Such that opposition to God and to His control and to His will shall in the end be completely eliminated. And eternal woe come to those who stand in His way. We are but the clay in the Potter’s hands. This world and all who dwell therein are but clay in the Potter’s hands. History is but clay in the potter’s hands – as God works His purpose out, as year succeeds to year. “*Woe to him who strives with him who formed him, a pot among earthen pots,*” cries the prophet Isaiah.⁶ And the Apostle Paul, writing to the Romans: “*Who can resist his will? Who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Has the potter no right over the clay?’*”⁷ “O house of Israel,” God speaks to Jeremiah, “*Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand.*” God is sovereign says this parable of the potter’s house. His will shall come to pass, no matter how difficult and rebellious the clay He has to work with.

And yet . . . let us not forget the patience of that potter with his clay. When it fails him, he does not cast it aside, but reworks it upon his wheel – patiently works with it, until at last it is formed according to the potter’s will. God is sovereign over human history, God is sovereign over each of our individual lives – and we do well never to lose sight of that truth. For it gives us hope when it seems like the world is coming apart at the seams to remember that “*though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.*”⁸ And it also chastens us with the truth whenever we decide that no one but myself is the boss of me, and I will do what I want with my life – it reminds us that, in the end, God is the One who gave us our lives, and God is the One to whom we must give account for our lives in the end.

And yet . . . that portrait of the potter patiently working and reworking the clay. Not giving up on it, taking its shortcomings and failings into account as he makes it and remakes it into what it is meant to be. Is not that how God is actually exercising His sovereignty in this world – working out His will in human history? Patiently, creatively, graciously, redemptively? God working out His will in this world not through compulsion or violence, but through love and compassion upon the clay of His creatures? In his lament, Jeremiah wanted God to come destroy, even double destroy, Israel right now, today – he has had enough and he has seen enough. But that is not how God the Sovereign Potter has chosen to work with the clay of His people, the clay of His rebellious world.

Remember that moment when Jesus was being arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. Remember how one of the disciples drew his sword in defense of Jesus, cutting off an ear from the high priest's servant. Remember how strongly Jesus rebuked that disciple: *"Put your sword away!"* And remember what He said next: *"Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scripture be fulfilled?"*⁹ There's so much in that short exchange. Jesus saying that He could, if He wished, bring down an angel army to terrify and compel all the earth into submission before God's holy will. Smash the clay with His fists.

But that that is not how God has chosen to exercise His sovereignty, not how God has chosen to exercise His authority over the earth. Not with the sword. *"But how then shall the Scripture be fulfilled?"* Not with the sword of an angel army – for remember how exactly Jesus then went on to fulfill the Scripture, how Jesus, after His arrest, then went on to exercise the sovereignty of God over His world. Not with the sword, but with the Cross. *"For God so loved the world . . ."*¹⁰ God is sovereign, but like that potter working with his clay, He is also patient in His sovereignty. He is long-suffering and yet boundlessly creative. Because He desires that, beneath His sovereignty, nothing and no one should be tossed aside and destroyed. But that all should be placed anew, and again and again, upon the Potter's wheel, in order to be reshaped for the glory of His eternal Kingdom.

I suppose that's why this world often seems to us to be in such a mess – because God has chosen to remake and reform and redeem His world by the love of the cross and not by the violence of the sword. The messiness of this world is not because God's will is not being done, not because God is not sovereign over all things, not because God's power is insufficient and is being thwarted by human evil. But rather because God has chosen to be patient in His sovereignty – desiring to redeem and reshape instead of to destroy. Because He desires not only to remove all sin from out of His world, but to do so by reshaping all of us sinners into the image of His perfect and beautiful Son, our Savior. We are, all of us, misshapen, our lives malformed before Him. But the Divine Potter has us and all creation still upon His wheel, still reworking us according to His plan, still working in us and upon us until we are at last made right. *"The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness,"* writes Peter, *"but is patient towards you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."*¹¹

And, speaking of Peter, that leads us to another meaning of what God speaks to Jeremiah at the potter's house: *"O house of Israel, can I not do with you as the potter has done? declares the Lord."* We hear it as a declaration of God's sovereignty – God will indeed do as He wills with the clay of Creation. But it can also, and just as rightly, be heard as an invitation for the clay to submit itself to the Potter's hands – especially when we remember how the potter took that misshapen clay and reworked it into something beautiful. Not just a declaration, but also an invitation from God: *"O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done?"* Will you not let me reshape you, rework you, make you into something beautiful and eternal? In other words, the Potter inviting the clay to let Him work with it. The Potter is sovereign – He will do with the clay as He chooses. But how much better, in the Potter's mind and in the Potter's heart, if the clay will let Him, allow Him, ask Him to work with it.

Speaking of Peter, as we said, speaking of Peter – remember that scene at the end of John’s Gospel when Peter, having denied Jesus three times on the night Jesus was arrested, now sits by the fire beside the risen Jesus. And three times Jesus then invites Peter to confess his sin, saying to him once for each denial, “*Peter, do you love me?*” And Peter three times affirming to Jesus that he is a sinner, that he is a misshapen lump of clay – but that he also desperately desires for Jesus to remake him, reform him, redeem him: “*Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.*” And then Jesus, three times, promising Peter that the clay of his life shall not be thrown away because of what he has done to Jesus, but will indeed be redeemed by what Jesus plans to with Peter. Peter will be reshaped by the Potter, used by the Potter, fired by the Potter into a new and redeemed life, with a new and greater purpose: “*Feed my sheep.*”¹² Peter would write some years later those beautiful words: “*Love covers a multitude of sins.*”¹³ I wonder if it wasn’t that very moment in his own life which stirred up those words. The love of the Potter shapes even our sins into the beauty of His saving purpose in us, into the beauty of His sovereign purpose working out through our lives and throughout all Creation. “*O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done?*” An invitation for us to turn around and give ourselves to Him: O child of God, sitting here this morning, will we not let the Potter take hold of the clay of our lives?

Peter Marshall, the beloved preacher and pastor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. during the middle of the last century, serving also as chaplain to the United States Senate, wrote a powerfully moving and memorable sermon on this same passage. I want to end with Marshall’s own ending:

*God hasn’t given up yet on His world, which is one world, and
could be one world of security, peace and brotherhood, instead
of two worlds of suspicion and fear . . .*

*God hasn’t given up on you,
He can still do great things for you, in you, and through you.
God is ready and willing and able.
What about you, and me?*

*We are, after all, like lumps of clay.
There are brittle pieces, hard pieces
We have little shape or beauty.
But we need not despair.
If we are clay, let us remember there is a Potter, and His wheel.*

*The old gospel song has it right:
“Have Thine own way, Lord,
Have Thine own way.
Thou art the Potter, I am the clay;
Mould me and make me, after Thy will,
While I am waiting, yielded, and still.”*

*That’s it.
We have only to be yielded, that is, willing, surrendered, and*

*He will do the rest.
He will make us according to the pattern for which, in His love,
He designed us.
And it will be good—for our own good—and for His glory.*

*Do not despair.
If you want to be different, you may.
You, too, can be changed for the better. Therein lies our hope—
and the hope of the world.*

*We are disciples in clay.
And there is still the skill of the Potter.¹⁴*

¹ Jeremiah 8:6.

² Jeremiah 17:15.

³ Jeremiah 17:16.

⁴ Jeremiah 17:18.

⁵ Jeremiah 17:18.

⁶ Isaiah 45:9.

⁷ Romans 9:20-21.

⁸ A line from Maltie D. Babcock's wonderful hymn, "This Is My Father's World."

⁹ Matthew 26:53-54 (51-54).

¹⁰ John 3:16.

¹¹ II Peter 3:9.

¹² John 21:15-19.

¹³ I Peter 4:8.

¹⁴ "Disciples in Clay," in Peter Marshall, Mr. Jones, Meet the Master: Sermons and Prayers of Peter Marshall (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1950), p. 46.