

TAKING A REFRESHER COURSE

Sermon, September 5, 2010

Texts: Jeremiah 18:1-11; Philemon 1-21

"I believe in God the Potter Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." That's the Apostles' Creed, as Jeremiah might have written it. *"I believe in God the Potter Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, Who is at work on you, and me, like a potter at work at a potter's wheel."* At craft shows, in art classes or in hobby shops, you can still find potter's wheels. Or, you might take classes in making pottery. If you do, you'll find these days the potter's wheel has a motor run by electricity. In Jeremiah's day, though, the potter's wheel was made of stone and run by foot power. A small stone, on which the pot was fashioned, was connected to a lower, larger stone that the potter turned by sweeping side to side with his feet. Eventually, an alternative solution was invented that involved a crankshaft with a lever that converted up-and-down foot motion into rotary motion, much like the early manual sewing machines. But before that invention, the potter had to exercise great coordination and literally had to throw his whole body into throwing a pot. He would dig a clump of mud out of a crock, place it on the wheel, and begin kicking sideways with his feet as he would center the clay in his muscular, wet hands, the moisture oozing between his strong fingers; slowly a pot or a vase or an urn would emerge from beneath his palms and fingers. Leaning over the wheel, kicking with his feet, forming the clay with His hands. Every now and then, a potter will suddenly collapse the whole thing. Having seen a flaw that only a master can discern, he crushes it and starts over. That's what the potter was doing on the day Jeremiah came to call: *"But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as it seemed best to him."*

After watching for a while, Jeremiah observed that's what God's been doing with His people all along. God, like a potter at his wheel, is at work on us ... shaping, forming, stretching, pushing, pulling us into shape. In fact, when in Genesis 2:7 it says "...the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground ..." the Hebrew word "formed" suggests a potter forming or molding clay. So God Who, in the beginning, scooped up a handful of mud, fashioning it into a person who could bear His divine image, is still at work with that mud, like a potter at his wheel, constantly correcting the flaws and fashioning His handiwork into a useful vessel for His purposes. Regardless of what we may have done to distort the shape of our lives, God the Potter Almighty always has His strong hands on us, re-forming us for His good purposes. Even when those crushing events happen in our lives, when it feels like everything is just caving in and collapsing all around us, even *those* times are God's way of remaking us. God has us firmly in hand as the wheel of life goes round and round; He's smoothing, soothing, shaping, molding and remaking us into beautiful and useful and treasured vessels. He is at work *in* us, He is at work *on* us, sitting at the potter's wheel, with divine hands pressing in and down and around us. As our lives take shape, many flaws appear which need correction. We got lots of lumps. We violate all sorts of God's prescriptions for how life is to be lived ... in relationships, with possessions, in the focus and purpose of our lives. There's some bad dirt mixed up in that living clay. God feels the friction of those lumps in His hands. But the God the Potter Almighty continues His fashioning, loving, redeeming, artistic handiwork, and day by day, with each turn of the wheel, we are being made new.

In God the Potter Almighty's good hands, we are changing.

For example, one day we wake up and realize that harboring anger against another, no matter how they might have wronged us, is not good for us, so we give it up. And to our delight, we find that with all that bottled up anger and bitterness no longer taking up space and energy, there is more room in our hearts for happier things and more energy in our lives for good things. We are changing. Or, one day we realize the way we are relating to our family, or our friends, or our job, or our co-workers, or our employees, or our church, is not good enough, we realize there's something better we could do or say or offer to these people in our lives ... and then, to our delight, we find as we resolve to do better we seem to have somehow found the ability or opportunity to do or say or offer something better ... again, God's hands are shaping us. Or one day we come to the realization that really everything in life comes from God's hand, gifts given to us as resources and occasions through which we can better express our faith and serve. And we find ourselves beginning to think about giving more, or about committing to a particular ministry, or even contemplating saying "yes" to a church nominating committee. God the Potter Almighty's hands are on us all along, forming us, making us into more useful vessels. Some of you may have watched the Bill O'Reilly show, where he begins each program by saying, "Caution! You are about to enter a no spin zone!" Well, I contemplated adapting that for our call to worship: "Caution! You are about to enter a SPIN zone." For here in worship we are all about placing ourselves on the spinning wheel to allow God the Potter Almighty to go to work on us to mold us, shape us, use us as He sees fit.

I love this image of a pot, a vessel. Pots and vessels are things used as containers, containers which are designed to provide refreshment. I draw your attention to one delightful verse from our Epistle reading, Philemon, verse 7, *"Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints."* In short, Philemon was a good pot, a good vessel. He was a source of refreshment to all the saints who encountered him. It is a high compliment Paul is paying here to his friend Philemon. *(The reference to that verse, by the way, was inscribed in my high school yearbook by someone I knew since the third grade, a dear friend whose parents also happened to be two of my youth leaders. Even though it's been many years, I still vividly remember looking up that reference and being so touched by the words.)*

A bit of background: Philemon had a runaway servant, Onesimus. He had fled Philemon's household, we don't know not why. We know Philemon was the well-to-do head of a large household in Colossae, and leader of the church that met in his home. He was a dear friend of Paul, a beloved co-worker. As mentioned, Onesimus was Philemon's servant. How that had come to be, we do not know. Probably he fallen into debt to Philemon and indentured himself to pay it off, which was not an uncommon practice in that day. Many of the people who worked the land had fallen into debt because of the onerous taxation of the occupying government; many lost their land, and indentured themselves to the wealthier citizens like Philemon. Why did Onesimus run? Some have speculated he had been abused; others speculated he committed some crime, absconding with some of Philemon's property when he took off ... but we really just don't know. All we know is that *while* he was on the run, Onesimus falls more deeply into God's shaping hands; through Paul's ministry, Onesimus became a follower of Jesus Christ. Like clay on the wheel, Onesimus was transformed from one who was *useless* to one who was *useful* as Paul writes in verse 11. Paul writes, *"Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful to you and to me."* There's actually something of a pun ... the name "Onesimus" literally means "Useful One." Paraphrased: *"The Useful One was useless to you, since he ran away. But by God's grace he is now living up to his name. He has become very useful to me and will be very useful to you."* That's something, by the way, that God the Potter Almighty has done for countless people through the ages and through to this day ... redeeming them, shaping them, changing them from useless to useful. And so, Paul asks Philemon to give Onesimus a second chance. "Don't punish him, I'll repay whatever he may have taken, receive him. Give him a clean slate, a fresh start. In fact, give him *more* than a fresh start; treat him like a beloved brother."

About thirty miles east of Spokane, WA is the town of Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. Late one night in Coeur d'Alene a few years ago some local residents called the police complaining about a car driving around and around the neighborhood ... in reverse. Police came to the scene, saw the car and the teenaged girl driving it, and pulled her over. In a burst of tears the girl told police her parents had let her use the car, but she had put too much mileage on it. *"I was just trying to unwind some of it,"* she wailed. There's a sermon in there somewhere! There are parts of our lives all of us would like to rewind and do over. If somehow driving around the block in reverse would expunge our record, we would all go out to the parking lot and rev up our engines. But something more than that is needed, and that is what the cross is all about. Christian faith is the faith of the second chance. That is the heart of our theology. We were all, every one of us, useless at one time or another. But Jesus Christ gave His life to make us useful to God. Second chances are why Christ came into the world.

By the way, when God lays hands on us to reshape us through Jesus Christ, usually we are not the only ones being transformed and refreshed; it invariably includes those around us. Notice, as Onesimus had been given another chance, as he is shaped on God the Potter Almighty's wheel, that wheel envelopes Philemon as well; he is to graciously receive his servant back, not as a servant, but as a brother ... even more than that, as a beloved brother; the very same language Paul used to describe his own relationship with Philemon!

There's a nice epilogue to this story: Some fifty years after this short letter was written, St. Ignatius of Antioch was on his way to martyrdom ... sentenced to death, he was eventually killed by lions in the Coliseum. On his way to his end in Rome, he wrote a series of letters to churches, some of which have been preserved, containing some of the earliest written records we have of the first century church's developing theology and history. One of those letters was to the church at Ephesus, and in that letter Ignatius praised their bishop ... whose name was Onesimus. Many believe this was the one and the same Onesimus of Philemon.

Biblical scholar E.J. Goodspeed observed that of all Paul's letters, Philemon is the only one addressed to an individual about a private matter. Goodspeed believed the letter was included within the corpus of Paul's writings because it was saved by that grateful, redeemed, refashioned, refreshed, servant Onesimus, who apparently went on to become a *very* useful vessel indeed in the hands of God the Potter Almighty.