

"The Allegory of the Potter"

Jeremiah 18:1-11

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²“Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” ³So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel.⁴The 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. ⁵Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁶**Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.** ⁷At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, **I will change my mind** about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. ⁹And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, **then I will change my mind** about the good that I had intended to do to it.

¹¹*Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.*

One of the great conundrums of life is the fact that there are people with **stellar IQs** who are **short on common sense**. People who exhibit **genius** within the narrow bandwidth of their expertise but lack any breadth of cultural literacy.

Conversely, there are human beings who will **never be labeled brilliant** by societal standards, but who startle us with insights about life. Many of us know this firsthand as family or friends of “special needs” people. They often voice **simple nuggets of wisdom** that awaken us to what is **truly important**.

I also believe there is **one definition of intelligence** that is sorely needed in **ALL** of us. It is the ability to **get outside ourselves and our given culture**. The ability to see our reality in time and place, then respond (not react) to it with a fresh, objective perspective.

Sociologists say that when it comes to our cultures, we are like *fish in water*. We swim in the conditioning of our upbringing, our genetic makeup, our juncture in

history. *Often, we never rise above these determining factors.* We never decide what to **claim** and what to **reject**, what to **shed** and what to **make part** of our lives. Examples are rife in our world:

- People who adopt the *spoon-fed religion* of their tribe or nation, then wield it as an exclusive truth that trumps the faith and beliefs of others. James Fowler, in his *Stages of Faith*, called this Stage Three—*Synthetic-Conventional Faith—a closed mindset that prevents us from celebrating the mystery of spirituality in all its diversity.*
- People reared with a righteous sense of nationalism, an idolatry of their country's identity and flag. *American Exceptionalism* in extreme forms is a tragic example, but history is replete with examples of dangerous nationalism.
- People indoctrinated with *racism, sexism, or homophobia* who never rise above the fear that promotes their exclusion and hatred.
- People whose *skin color or class* has afforded them a *privilege* that traffics, consciously or not, in *systemic injustice*.
- People raised to put their trust and security in *material things*.
- People trained to *gauge their worth* by the hollow standards of *power and prestige*.¹

Let's think about these things in terms of our text from Jeremiah this morning.

Recall that this passage begins with a *parable of a potter*, who illustrates how God interacts with nations—more specifically, with Israel (verse 6). The (Roman Catholic) *New America Bible* translation of verse 4 best expresses the message of this parable: “*Whenever the object of clay which he was making turned out badly in his hand, he tried again, making of the clay another object of whatever sort he pleased.*”

(Jeremiah assumed the potter was male, but that does not mean he thought of God as a male.)

The potter does not discard clay if it is defective (e.g., lumpy) or if the potter made a mistake (e.g., applying too much or not enough water); instead, the potter corrects the imperfection or changes the design.

¹ Adapted from Krin Van Tatenhove's, *Born Again? Reflections on the Journey*, September 3, 2019

The traditional interpretation of this parable is that *God determines the actions and fate of individuals and nations*. However, the potter's actions show that the potter **responds** to the clay.

To be sure, the potter determines what kind of **change** is possible and desirable; but the result is the potter's response to the nature and behavior of the clay. Moreover, the potter's **mind changes** (repents!) and creatively **adapts** to the clay's reality.

God might threaten to destroy a nation, because of its disobedience to God's purposes; but, if it repents, **God will also repent** (verses 7-8)! Similarly, God might promise to build up a nation; but, if it refuses to follow God's ways and acts in evil ways, **God will “repent” and not do as God had promised** (verses 9-10).

This reading then ends on a somewhat *positive note*, with a hint of **hope**: God's threats serve God's desire that nations, specifically Israel, would repent and stop their evil ways (verse 11).

What does this tell us about the nature of God? And us?

Jeremiah, you see, is exploring an *alternative* to the classical theistic idea of divine *impassivity and omnipotence*. (Aristotle called God, “*the unmoved mover!*”). The God of classical theists is *impassive*; that is, God is *unaffected by anything that happens in the world and is, therefore, unchanging*.

Such a God might seem to provide *stability* in a world of *constant change*, **but it cannot love**. Love is relational, For example, when I say, “*I love chocolate!*” what I mean is that I am *deeply affected by chocolate*, I eagerly *desire the effects* it has on my taste buds, and my taste buds trigger a strong *desire* at the mere sight of its color, especially if it is **dark chocolate!**

How much more relational, interactive, and empathetic is the love between persons! It would be a sad commentary on our human relationships if the sight of our spouses, significant “others,” children, and close friends triggered *less feeling than the sight of dark chocolate!*

The love we share with those close to us is **also** more complex than my love of dark chocolate. **Desire to be intimately related** is an important part of it, and that includes a willingness to deal creatively with *differences and faults*, as well as a

readiness to celebrate *gifts and achievements*. Because of our love, we share sorrows, and together we envision a future and shared adventures. In short, ***to love is to be open to change in response to another.***

You see, ***Jeremiah's God can change God's mind!*** Jeremiah's God *adapts* God's creativity in response to changing realities. Jeremiah's God *wishes* repentance and is *creative* and *relentless* in the attempt to persuade *individuals and nations* to repent.

And so, the clay *exerts influence* on the potter, just as the potter *affects* the clay. The potter does so *unsurpassably*, but not *omnipotently*. A potter creatively *transforms* the clay, *but only within the limits that the clay presents to the potter*. As the potter *wishes*, the potter also *adapts designs*, and even entirely *changes* the intended object, *in response* to the clay's changes.

And so it is with God. God's "design" for each of us and for each nation is a *work in progress*. God's desired path for us is *not set in stone* from time immemorial; ***God adapts and changes it as God responds to the ways we change.*** God's judgment about us *adapts and changes* as God *responds* to our changing lives. We are not automatons! And the future is not pre-determined!²

I think this is interesting considering how God is frequently portrayed in the New Testament—Jeremiah's concept of God shows up there, too.

Recall that *in his clandestine meeting with Nicodemus, Jesus* famously said "*Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*" (John 3:7) It's a pity that these words have been coopted by Christian fundamentalists, *a pat phrase that means conversion to Stage Three Christianity*.

I see them (rather) as a ***deeper call to wake up, to be born outside the determinates of our lives, to recognize the timeless existence of God's liberating presence that permeates everything around us.***

When this happens, *the scales fall off our eyes* like they did with the Apostle Paul following his conversion. *I believe we ALL need this transformation* (even though

² Inspired by, David J. Lull's commentary on Jeremiah 18:1-11 in, *Real Spirituality for Real Life (Faith in Process)*, September 2013

we will experience it differently). It helps us *evolve* into citizens of the world, not just the territories of our genetic and cultural conditioning.

Of course, this is hard work. It begins with a sobering analysis of our own habitual thinking. It often requires *repentance, amends, even restitution*. But the resulting freedom is well worth the effort.

Ask yourself: *How did Jesus describe this freedom?* In that same conversation with Nicodemus, he said “*The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*”

Or, as my “special needs” friend, *David*, recently said, “*There will never be peace unless people change.*³

Friends, different conceptualizations of God have existed for millennia. And today, millions and millions of people are in search of a God able to guide us through the challenges of the present.

For example, you might think that *atheism* means a rejection of God *outright—but that is not strictly true*; atheism involves *repudiating the current conception of God*.

Historically, that has meant people abandoning conceptions of the divine *if they see them as having no relevance*. As a result, atheism was already a phenomenon with a long pedigree by the time it really took off in the nineteenth century.

In the Christian west, for instance, the traditional *theistic* figure of God (omnipresent, omniscient) now seemed a poor fit for the modern world.

Technological advances gave people a new sense of autonomy. The figure of a *Big Brother* who oversaw all human activity and upon whom humans were dependent just didn’t cut it anymore.

But one thing is certain: *times continue to change (as it always has) and old conceptions of God may no longer fit the times [e.g. the spiritual but not religious; deconstruction/reconstruction; the demise of level three Christianity—Process,*

³ Ibid, *Reflections on the Journey*, Van Tatenhove

Liberation, and Feminist theologies are all an attempt to address this contemporary reality].

In the twenty-first century (we are living through a time in which) the concept of God (is now) adapting to the demands of the present—and this creates anxiety and cultural turbulence. (But as) it does so, God will (likely) stay with us for a good while yet.⁴ God isn't finished molding us yet!

⁴ Karen Armstrong, *The History of God*, Harper, New York