

“Like Clay”

Reading: *Jeremiah 18:1-11; 32:6-15*

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I remember as a child going to the Indiana State Fair and always insisting that we stop by the pottery demonstration in the pioneer village area. There was always a potter there working on a jug or a vase or something, and I loved how effortless they made that act of creation look. Hopefully you've seen a potter at work somewhere, as they hypnotically spin the wheel and the smoothly curving form of a mug or a bowl rises out of what was just a misshapen lump. It's a bit magical to watch. Sometimes they do indeed push the strength of the clay too far, and they try to stretch it beyond what it can bear, and it wobbles out of shape and becomes useless. But no matter, it's still clay, and that clay can be re-formed into something else. As a child at the State Fair I always secretly envied the potter and wished I had a pottery wheel, though I'm sure their craft is much more difficult than they made it look.

I haven't studied the archaeology of pottery in Jeremiah's time and place, but the pottery wheel had been around for a long time by that point, so it's possible that what I saw at the Indiana State Fair wasn't that much different than what Jeremiah saw that day long ago. God told Jeremiah to go down to the potter's house, and what he saw there became a parable of what would become a timeless spiritual message. The clay in the hands of the potter is an image of what God is doing with His people: He's shaping them, and when one plan doesn't work out because the clay doesn't cooperate, God the potter just shapes it into something different.

It leads us to some questions that people have grappled with in their spiritual lives for a very long time. As is usually the case with the writings of the prophets, Jeremiah's words that day were intended for his people during his time. He wasn't necessarily trying to give a timeless spiritual illustration that would be used for thousands of years and in many different cultures. He wasn't intending to tell *you* today that *you* as a twenty-first century American are clay in the potter's hands, he was telling the nation of Judah in the sixth century BC that they were clay in the potter's hands. The illustration had a specific meaning and a specific application for that time related to the events that were soon to happen in their life as a nation and their lives as individuals. However, it's also true that Jeremiah's parable is so packed with meaning that we can't help but see its relevance for us today. We can't help but be moved to see ourselves on that potter's wheel. That's the power of a good metaphor; it has layer upon layer of meaning.

And so while we understand the immediate application of Jeremiah's parable to his own time and people, we wonder about its application to our own lives as well. Am I just clay in God's hands? Am I just an inert lump of wet dust that moves and gains shape and lives because of the external forces of the pressure of God's hands and the imposition of God's will on me? What does that suggest about my will, my dreams, my desires? If I push it a little harder and shift the metaphor, does it mean I'm just a robot, spiritually speaking, with no real agency or control? It makes me think of a passage from the prophet Isaiah's writings, in Isaiah 45:9: “Woe to those who quarrel with their Maker, those who are nothing but potsherds among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, ‘What are you making?’ Does your work say, ‘The potter has no hands?’” Is that what we are, and is that the “spiritual” or “godly” or “holy” response to what happens to me, to just throw my hands up in the air and say that I'm just the clay and God is the potter, and there's no sense in trying to understand, no point in trying to make plans, no point in having any sort of dialogue with God?

We're really asking the question of whether there is such a thing as fate. Are we just cogs in a machine with no control or involvement in what happens to us? Are we controlled by unseen forces like fate or karma or whatever you want to call it? Is God, frankly, absent from any real relationship with me? God might be shaping me on the wheel, but does He get annoyed if I try to say anything? "Does the clay say to the potter, 'What are you making?'" Woe! Sometimes it feels like that. And sometimes we even hear well-meaning preachers or well-meaning mentors or friends reinforce that message.

As we've spent these few weeks listening to the words of Jeremiah, we've been seeing how he confronts the lies of his culture. Again, he was dealing with the specific needs and struggles and situations of his own people and their world, but they were caught in lies that are as old as time itself, and so we continue to deal with some of those same lies and need to hear Jeremiah's words of truth with fresh ears. We've listened in as he confronted the lie that God is surprised by our circumstances, and he confronted the lie that we can build cisterns of our own that will not leak rather than relying on God who is our source of living water. And today we hear another lie, another one that has at its root the question of whether God is good enough and strong enough. Today the lie has to do with God's involvement in our lives: sometimes the world tells us that there is fate, that God or some other force controls and predetermines everything that goes on, and we're just clay. Or maybe God is totally out of the picture, and we're controlled by the stars or something: there's just fate out there, and even God doesn't really change what has already been written.

I caught part of an interview on the radio recently with an artist whose latest project involved him getting dressed up and made up in a variety of scenarios depicting the kinds of things that might happen to him in the future. So, apparently, he was shown as a homeless drunk stumbling down the street, or as a white-collar criminal getting arrested, or as a lonely senior citizen, and so on. And what's more significant than the details of the project and why he was doing it – and I only heard part of the interview anyway – was one statement in particular that caught my attention. The interviewer asked him whether he thought that "a lot of us fear death less than we fear insignificance," and the artist agreed and said that "I think that the idea that your life might not work out the way you want it to work out – I think that's more frightening [than death]." That statement caught my attention. I'd never heard of this artist before; I have no idea who he is, but those words say so much. That's the sentiment so many people live with, and it's part of the lie that our world perpetuates. We have this notion that there is a fate predetermined for each of us, and it's basically inescapable. But at the same time we all have ideas of what we want our lives to be like, and so I want to believe that I can control my fate through my own ingenuity or force of will, and if my fate turns out to be different than what I want, it's a terrible personal tragedy. Maybe fate is in control or God is impersonal and predetermines everything, but I'd rather have the illusion of control over my life and it's personally devastating to be reminded that I'm not, for my life not to work out how I want it to.

Are we just clay in the hands of fate? Is there some grand plan floating out there in space and you and I are just robots fulfilling our programming, and by some cruel joke we've been given the false sense of freedom? Is God just an absent-minded potter, and we're all just lumps of clay to be used or re-used or discarded as He sees fit? That's not what Jeremiah's trip to the potter's house tells us, though it would be easy to think that at a quick glance.

If we were to continue reading further down into the chapter, we would see that the people around Jeremiah think that. They think everything is already determined; it might as well be fate. They reject his message and plot against him because they think that “the teaching of the law by the priest will not cease, nor will counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophets.” They've already chosen to believe that things are finally determined; everything will just keep going like it always has. They sound like they're deeply trusting in God to save them even in these desperate times, but they're not: after all, God promised to save His people. But no, this is not an expression of trust, it's an expression of complacency and chosen blindness because they've taken God's promises and fossilized them until they turned into fate. Everything will go on as it always has, we hope.

But no, God is not some personification of fate whose words get cast in stone. It's not that simple, because God is alive and personal and He's intimately concerned with our world and our lives. When we talk about there being such a thing as fate, what we really mean is that I've decided not to respond to God's call on my life, and I'm hoping God is powerless to do much about it. I'm hoping there's already a fate that's been determined for me, and my response has no effect on the outcome. But no, what matters is not the word of fate and our acceptance of it; what matters is the word of God and our response to it. God the potter is a metaphor, and a powerful one, but it's not a full representation of the truth of God's goodness and power. There is no such thing as fate, but there are promises from God. The way we respond to those promises determines the outcome.

The clay is not merely inert in the potter's hand; it can become marred or corrupt. What happens then is up to the potter: he doesn't discard the clay, because he can rework it into something new. There are promises from God, not fate.

God says to Jeremiah that He declares His intentions to nations. If God declares that He will bring disaster to a nation and they repent, God will “relent,” He will change His intention for them, and not bring the disaster. The clay has some say in what it is made into. And likewise, if God declares good for a nation, and they turn toward evil, then God will “reconsider” – same word in Hebrew as “relent” just before – the good He intended. The King James translates it as “repent;” God will “repent” of the good or the harm He intended. Some of us might have a theological problem with God “repenting” or apparently changing His mind, but the point is that God sometimes acts toward us in response to our response to Him. He's not just changing His mind because He's fickle, He's changing His disposition toward us because we've responded faithfully or unfaithfully to Him and the promises He's made.

An interesting connection comes in Genesis 6, in the story right before Noah's flood. Genesis uses some of the same vocabulary as our passage today: the world becomes “corrupt,” which is the same word as the clay becoming “marred,” and as a result God “regrets” or “repents of” making humans – He changes His disposition toward them – using the same word as in our passage today. In the story of the Exodus, God “repents” from destroying the Hebrews after Moses prays and intercedes for them. In the book of Samuel, God “repents” of making Saul king; Saul disobeyed God, so God “regretted” making Him king. In the writings of Amos, God “repents” from sending disaster on His people after Amos intercedes for them. In the story of Jonah, God “repents” from destroying the city of Nineveh after they repent. So the issue is not that God is changeable, that there's no fate and therefore God can't be trusted. The issue is that we can't be trusted; we're changeable and so often faithless. We're clay that falls apart.

There's another illustration of this in our reading from Jeremiah 32. At first glance you might once again be tempted to think it's all about fate; God is basically absent or powerless in the face of the plan that's already been written. He tells Jeremiah to go and buy a field in Anathoth, his home town. The reason this real estate deal is significant to the biblical story is that it's taking place while the armies of the Babylonians are encamped around the city of Jerusalem. It's really just a matter of weeks or months at this point before the capital city, the last holdout against the invaders, falls before their power and the city is reduced to rubble. Thousands will be killed and thousands of others, including the last king of Judah, will be taken far away into exile. Hardly a wise time to purchase land. But God tells Jeremiah to do it, and do it publicly, and take it seriously, because even though Jeremiah himself will never get to enjoy the land he purchased, he's giving a sign to the nation that the coming destruction is not the end of the story. We are not left to the cruel whims of impersonal fate, and God is not absent during our suffering.

It's not a theological discourse on the nature of fate and free will, it's a promise from God. It's not a logical argument that you can only vaguely remember the details of – I remember some prophet explaining to me logically how God is still involved in our lives and I don't remember how the argument went, but it sure made sense at the time – no, it's a promise that you can walk to and look at and touch if you want to. You can go to that plot of land, and when you walk across it you can remember the promise God made concerning it.

That story of Jeremiah buying a field ends with God promising that His people will buy fields in that land again one day. Destruction and exile are not the end, because God's faithfulness – not fate – has the final say. And so He promises that rather than people being bad clay that gets marred and fights against the potter's hands, God “will give them singleness of heart and action,” literally “one heart and one way.” No going back and forth, no fighting against God's promises, no more corruption in the clay. Just faithful love. That's what we're called to: singleness of heart and action, trusting in the goodness and power of our loving God, who has been faithful to His promises for generations.



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