

McCabe United Methodist Church

April 18, 2010

Jeremiah 18:1-6

“In The Potter’s House”

by Pastor Gary Walters

Our scripture lesson this morning comes from Jeremiah and I’m going to start at Chapter 18 and read verses 1 through 6. “This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord. ‘Go down to the potter’s house and there I will give you my message.’ So I went down to the potter’s house and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot that he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. Then the word of the Lord came to me, ‘Oh house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does? Like clay in the hands of the potter, so are you in my hands, oh house of Israel.’” The word of God for the people of God, thanks be to God.

Well, this is pretty characteristic of Jeremiah that in every day, ordinary things he finds the word of the Lord or the word of the Lord comes to him. Everything from baskets of figs to tree and their branches, to evening prayers in the temple to buying a field; all of these different events Jeremiah finds the word of the Lord for his people. It’s kind of an aside, but I suspect that if we paid better attention that we might find the word of the Lord around us more in just those everyday, ordinary things.

But, the potter in Jeremiah’s day was a common profession and a much needed one. They made everything from the lamps that lit their homes to the plates that they ate out of and the containers that they stored things in were made out of clay and came off of the potter’s table. I don’t know that there was a potter on every corner, but it was something that the people were very familiar with. Actually, it says wheel in the scripture but really the Hebrew word is two wheels and the idea, I’m sure you have seen a potter’s wheel or table, where it has a disk that spins and so the biblical image is that there is that wheel on top but that there is also a wheel below. They worked barefoot and they were clever enough that they could spin the bottom wheel with their feet and then shape the pot on top as it was spun around and around.

Well it so happened that the way the potters work, it’s not uncommon for them to start to shape and form their pot and then have to start all over again. Whether they find an air bubble somewhere in that clay or maybe even an impurity just the size of a grain of sand, will throw the whole thing off. What starts out as a beautiful pot or a well-shaped vase might suddenly turn into a big blob and so they pack it all back down, they take the impurities, or the air bubble, out and then they start over, forming it every so skillfully with their hands.

Well, for whatever reason, this passage doesn’t say, but the potter had an issue with the lump of clay on the wheel this day. We don’t know if there was an impurity or an air bubble or if it was

simply too hard or too soft for the purpose that the potter had in mind, but the point is that it was unfit. It didn't work for what the potter originally had in mind. Simple enough.

Certainly the quality of clay determined the use for which it could be put to use. The potter may have to very well change their mind midcourse and reshape it down into that lump and then form it into something else. That quality then affected its usefulness.

God basically says the same thing to Israel. He says, "Can't I do with you as this potter?" In Jeremiah's day, Israel was at a bit of a crossroads. Actually it was Judah. Israel was the northern kingdom and had already been carried off into exile by this time. But, Judah, the southern kingdom, that's Benjamin and then the tribe of Judah, still existed for several hundred more years. But in this time they were in crisis, almost the whole period. Different countries around them were coming to power and each kind of took their turn at oppressing and chipping away at the kingdom of Judah and then there were some of the larger kind of flow and ebb of political life in that ancient Near East where there were armies sweeping across those regions. There was this threat of being swept up and dominated by one of these foreign powers. But the real crisis, and the real issue, wasn't the political tides of that day; the real issue was Israel's unwillingness to follow God's law and to follow the ways that he had laid out before him.

Jeremiah had a tough job. He was born as a priest and started his ministry there, but one day while serving the Lord in the temple courts, the word of the Lord comes to him in this amazing vision of God's presence, filling the temple courts. From there he quickly starts arguing with God, I don't want the job, because it was basically to deliver judgment on Judah for their disobedience. At that day and age, the king and the administration, the people who were in charge, were bent on doing things their way by their plans and they had no intention of submitting to the word of the Lord or listening to any prophetic message. They had their agenda and they were going to follow it. As a consequence, Jeremiah ended up spending a good chunk of his life in prison. In fact at one point he was even in prison in the bottom of an empty cistern because they didn't want him in any place where somebody could actually hear him speak and so they just lowered food and water down to him through a hole and left him there; because they didn't want this word of the Lord to get out to the people, this word of judgment.

But, on this particular day, Jeremiah is free to wander and sent down to the potter's house. Well, in the process of all of that ebb and flow in the life of Israel, we can well imagine that God found them resistant to his shaping and forming and that there was more than a grain of sand or an air bubble in the clay, so to speak, as he is working with them. But, Israel is unwilling to be reshaped or reformed in the hands of God.

All of that is interesting enough, but as this passage kind of rattled around in my head this week, the question that comes to my mind is how are we shaped and how are we formed. How does God work on us like that potter with the clay; because, of course, Jeremiah is speaking to God's

people in his day, but I think it is not just for the folks in Jeremiahs' time but it is for us also. Us, as McCabe Church, because of course Jeremiah is talking to the whole nation of Israel. Well, I can't talk to the nation, but I can talk to McCabe and I think the word works for us collectively as a whole, who does God want to shape us into as McCabe Church as this part of his body? Then who does he want to shape and form us into as individuals as a part of his body? So how are we shaped and how are we formed into that vessel, that instrument, that tool, that God can best use to accomplish his work and his purpose.

Well as that question rattled around in my head, there was a person that came to mind. His name is Kernit Grimshaw and he is the bank president in Mission, South Dakota. If you meet him, he would strike you as a typical bank president, it's not a bad thing, but here was someone who obviously was very competent, very good at working with people and a very good boss and just a good manager. But the interesting thing about Kernit, I found out from his wife, that he actually started at the bank as the janitor when he was in 9th grade and from there worked his way up to become the president of the bank. That's remarkable! Not a day of college education and yet he was the president, and well earned that title and that respect.

I asked Kernit one day about how that came about and his face lit up. He started talking about the man who was the president of the bank when he was hired to be the janitor. And in the course of the conversation and getting shown around, the bank president overheard Kernit say, "Well, I'm just the janitor.", and the president came out and he took Kernit and he sat him down and he said "Kernit, there are no small jobs. We need you to be the best janitor you can be if this bank is going to be as successful as it can be." Well Kernit took that to heart and so he made sure that he did the best job that he could do as the janitor. Well it wasn't long and he was a cashier and again, talking about this bank president, who just kind of cultivated and shaped and prodded and when he became cashier he pulled Kernit aside and said "Remember it's all about the customer. Your job is to make sure that they feel important and their request is the most important thing that you can address when they are in front of you. It's all about the customer."

Well Kernit took that to heart and it wasn't long and he was put in charge of those cashiers and I don't know how the hierarchy in a bank works but he worked his way up. He became a loan officer, became vice president and then president. In the time I was in Mission, South Dakota, he was asked twice to move, once to a bigger bank and then once to corporate office because they recognized in him someone that they could put in charge and he would excel and do it excellently and here was somebody that they could train and who would fulfill his job and his tasks marvelously. Remember, not a day of college education but he learned well from that bank president that he started under, and we can presume others along the way. Very shapeable. Just having that heart that was humble and willing to take the advice and take that poking and prodding from others at times.

What does it look like when God is shaping and forming us? I think it is a lot like Kernit.

Using those opportunities or accepting those opportunities as God's way of shaping and forming us so that whatever we are about, whether we are a student or an employee, it can even be more of the everyday, ordinary kind of things, whether as a parent or as a son or a daughter, a friend, whatever role, task, position we find ourselves in, I think all of those can be opportunities where God will shape and form us. There are times when he is shaping and forming and, you know what, he finds something that needs to be weeded out. That grain of sand or that air pocket and he has to smash us down and kind of start over. The smashing isn't very much fun, but in the hands of God he can do marvelous things. Certainly Kernit's comment wouldn't turn our heads, "I'm only the janitor.", but the bank president recognized instantly that there was an attitude of, maybe I deserve better, or I can do more, but he wanted to make sure that Kernit knew that if he did his best with that, other things would come. No unimportant jobs.

Well all of those tasks and rolls we find ourselves in are the opportunities that God uses to shape and form us. How we respond in terms of, do we resist that shaping and forming, do we insist upon our own way, or do we cooperate with that and do we approach it with humility and do we seek to use those opportunities to serve God and to serve others. Because, I think that attitude of the heart makes all the difference in the world. It's the difference between God being able to shape and form us and just being a lump of clay on the table. All of those things, all of those everyday, ordinary things, I think Jeremiah had it right, that in those the word of God comes to us to shape and to form and to craft us into God's tool and into God's instrument. That he is leaving his imprint upon us, making us more and more like Christ. Whether it is as parents or children, whether it is as students, employees or bosses, whether it is relating to family or friends, God will use all those people and all of those places to shape and form us, if we will let him.

Will you pray with me? Lord, we thank you that you're not done with us. Help us to accept all those circumstances as opportunities to be shaped more and more into your image, that we might be who you need us to be, for the sake of your kingdom. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.