
The Potter's Hand

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**A sermon by the Rev. George M. Maxwell, Jr.
The Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost: Proper 18 - Year C**

Jeremiah sounds like a prophet of wrath.

More than any other prophet, he warns of the imminence and severity of the wrath of God.

Unlike the prophets who came before him, he accuses the people of provoking the anger of God.

He is, of course, living in a time of crisis.

Judah has become a pawn in the violent chess game being played by the Babylonians to the north and the Egyptians to the south.

The endgame will include the destruction of Jerusalem, the fall of the temple, and the exile of many of the people.

It is faithful, in a way, to interpret these events as the vengeance of God, as divine punishment for human sin. It acknowledges that God is still in control, and that the people are responsible for their fate.

But, listen again to how Jeremiah describes God in our reading for today.

The 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. Jer. 18:3

Is there another way to understand the wrath of God?

Giuseppe Tornatore, the award-winning director, suggests another way in his movie, "A Pure Formality."

The movie opens with the startling sound of a gunshot, closely followed by the heavy breathing and sloshing footsteps of a man frantically running through the woods after dark in the middle of a torrential rainstorm.

We don't know who he is, but we immediately suspect that he is guilty of something.



The police eventually pick him up and take him to a station located nearby in an old, stone house. It's a place that continually puts you on edge. Water is dripping through the cracks in the roof. The phone lines are dead. The electricity threatens to go off at any minute.

We begin to realize that it's going to take some time to figure out who this suspect really is.

When the Inspector of Police, who is played by Roman Polanski, finally arrives, the suspect, who is played by Gerard Depardieu, angrily demands his rights and gets so agitated that he has to be physically restrained by the guards.

An interview follows, although it quickly begins to feel more like an interrogation.

The suspect says he is Mr. Onoff, a famous French writer. But, no one believes him. Mr. Onoff happens to be the Inspector's favorite novelist, and he claims to have read all of Onoff's works. He quotes from memory a long passage from one of Onoff's novels.

Although the suspect didn't recognize the passage quoted by the Inspector, eventually he is able to quote enough of his own work to convince the Inspector that he is the Mr. Onoff that everybody has heard so much about.

This is enough to establish some common ground for the two men to stand on, but the Inspector persists in following standard police procedure. He presses on to ask Mr. Onoff all of the usual questions. What is your name? When were you born? Where do you live? What did you do today?

He reminds us that we still don't know who this man really is.

As Onoff begins to account for his day, we are given spliced-in scenes of what actually happened. We can tell that he is not telling the truth. We can't tell what has happened, but we can tell that Onoff is leaving some things out, slanting some things in his favor, and simply lying about others.

Inevitably, the story begins to contradict itself.

Each time it does, the Inspector notes the contradiction and starts the interview all over again, from the top, as if he hadn't heard anything that had been said before. "What is your name? When were you born? Where do you live? What did you do today?"

The Inspector tells Onoff that the whole process is just a formality. Onoff suspects otherwise, of course. And, so do we.

As if to validate our feelings, the door of an old cupboard accidentally swings open to reveal a small animal trap. It's not what we might expect. It's not designed to kill what it catches. It's designed to hold the trapped animal until the trap can be removed and the animal released somewhere else.

Mr. Onoff is overtaken by another burst of anger and demands to know why they are holding him.

The Inspector tells him that a crime has been committed near his house. The police have the victim, but they can't identify him. They believe that Mr. Onoff knows the victim and will eventually tell them who it is.

This leads to a series of confessions.

The first confession is that Onoff isn't who he says he is.

In response to the Inspector's questions, Onoff claims that he has never fired a gun. The Inspector reminds the writer that he served in the armed forces. Mr. Onoff then confesses that he never really served in the military. He just made it all up because he thought that people would buy more of his books if they thought he was a man of action.

He even changed his name.

The second confession is that Onoff didn't write all of the books that he said he wrote.

The Inspector presents Mr. Onoff with a duffle bag full of photographs. Apparently, Onoff kept pictures of all of the people in his life, kind of like a photographic journal. Mr. Onoff picks up a photograph of a disheveled old man. He credits the old man with having inspired his greatest novel.

He says that the old man produced pages and pages of nonsensical prose. Mr. Onoff spent three years after the man died trying to understand what the man had written. He finally broke the code and, when he realized how beautiful the other man's words really were, Onoff published them as his own.

He didn't even dedicate the book to the old man.

Here, we begin to notice something different about each of these two characters.

The Inspector is still pressing for the truth. He remains intent upon getting to the bottom of it all. But, you begin to get the sense that he meant it when he said at the beginning of the interview that he was doing it all for Onoff's benefit.

Mr. Onoff begins to understand the same thing. He seems to grasp that the only way out for him is to come to terms with who he is and what he has done. Only the truth will set him free.

The final confession is the most surprising.

When Onoff decides at last to recount the day as it really happened, we learn how much he has been hiding. He had not been alone all day. He did have a gun. And, he did kill someone.

He killed himself.

Mr. Onoff seems surprised, as if he had forgotten what he had done. He breaks down and weeps. He hands himself over, if you will, and asks for forgiveness.

And then, everything begins to change.

The rain stops. The sky clears. And, the handcuffs are taken off.

Mr. Onoff now understands where he is. The police station is on the other side of death. It is not heaven nor is it hell. It is another stop on the journey to salvation.

We might think of it as a place where the potter works, a place where he reworks the clay that has spoiled in his hands into another vessel, one that seems good to him.

As Onoff looks around the police station for the last time, he sees the small animal trap. We remember hearing the stirrings of a mouse that had been caught in the trap during Onoff's confessions. Now, we see that the mouse is gone and so is the cheese that had been placed there as bait.

What appeared to be a trap was, in fact, an opportunity for freedom.

What appeared to be bait was, in fact, a gift.

Mr. Onoff asks what might be in store for him next.

The Inspector says that he doesn't know, but then he looks at the clearing sky and notes that it's good sign.

"Mr. Inspector," says Onoff, "you have a good job. Difficult, but , "

The Inspector nods in agreement. He knows that he is doing God's work. He is, in this way, the hand of the potter.

The point, I think, is that what we experience as the wrath of God is really just wrath. It is not something that God does to us. It is something that God allows us to do to ourselves.

God may be angry. But, it is our anger that leads us so often to choose death.

God is the one who keeps choosing life.

God is the potter who keeps returning to the wheel to rework the spoiled clay into yet another vessel.