
Does God Love a Spoiled Vessel?

A sermon by the Reverend Canon Beth Knowlton

4 p.m. Evensong

Proper 18

Jeremiah 18:1-11

"The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. 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."

A number of years ago, I led an art and spirituality retreat with a number of artists from the Camp Mikell folk school. I was excited because I had always wanted to try my hand at pottery. I somehow had all those images of beautiful pots coming into being I saw as child on *Sesame Street*. You remember? Graceful hands working the clay, seemingly without effort, as amazing vessels came into being. If you watch a master potter, and not for very long, you can easily believe that this is something that happens quite naturally.

Surely, you place the clay in the middle of the wheel and off you go. I fully expected by the end of the weekend to have several pieces worthy of exhibition. If any of you are potters, you are already laughing at my naïveté. Because you know, I approached my first venture into pottery with excitement and some very unrealistic expectations.

Before we ever even got to the wheel, we had to spend a lot of time preparing the clay. We had to literally slap any sign of air out of it. (This I actually found quite therapeutic.) Then we spent the better part of two days just trying to center a small ball of clay on the wheel. It took an amazing amount of effort just to get it in the center of the wheel. And then, a fair amount of strength to start shaping it.

Where was the ease I expected? I was shocked to find out my "spoiled vessels" far outnumbered anything that was even usable. Others on the retreat were feeling the same way. Our frustrations were audible, and we wondered what we had gotten ourselves into. Rarely had I had an experience where I expected something to be fun and easy, turn out so much harder in reality.

"The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. 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."

We have been spending some time with Jeremiah these past weeks. We have in him all the highs and lows of prophetic witness. As Rabbi Abraham Heschel notes so beautifully in his work with Jewish prophets, they are uniquely able to channel the emotions of God. While the prophet sought to escape his calling, his experience was so intense as to be unavoidable. As Heschel puts it, "the prophetic sympathy was stronger than the will, the inner passion more powerful than the personal disposition." Heschel concludes that Jeremiah "hated his prophetic mission. To a soul full of love, it was horrible to be a prophet of castigation and wrath." (Heschel, *The Prophets*)

What is wonderful if we fully embrace Jeremiah is that our own natural feelings of rage, sadness, frustration, and passion,

can have a different context. While they still are difficult, we can look at them as made in the image of God as much as our emotions like joy, happiness, generosity, and compassion.

This can be a bit scary when God is concerned that we are headed down the wrong path. But is it any different than the concern we feel when we see someone we love making choices that are endangering themselves? It doesn't take me long in reviewing my own experiences to see times when my parents out of love called me to account in ways that were not pleasant. But they were still acts of love.

As people of faith we are called again and again to place ourselves in the center of the wheel and let God form us. This is not always a pleasant experience. We can feel as if pressures beyond our control leave us off center, that far too much effort is required to even find ourselves near the wheel. But we are more malleable than we even believe, and God is willing to work and rework us into something of beauty. But we have to be willing to cede a bit of our need for control and perfection in the process. The more we let go, the more likely it is we can allow the transformation that God wishes for each of us to happen.

At the end of my retreat time I had finally made it to the stage where I was able to produce three somewhat sad looking bowls. But, they were bowls. A bit uneven, and surely not worthy of much of anything. I took to referring to them as my "cat food" bowls. But the strange thing was, I was really proud of those ugly things. They represented hours of labor and tenacity, and what they looked like at the end, really didn't matter much to me at that point. Because you see, I loved those bowls. I had come into an intimate relationship with them through all that effort. So their perfection, was no longer the defining characteristic of their worth. Their being was all I cared about.

So, I have to wonder, what if that is how God feels about each of us? Amen