
Treasures in Earthen Vessels

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Harkins
Proper 18 – Year C

In the Name of the God of Creation, who loves us all...Amen.

Good morning, and welcome to the Cathedral on this Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost and a day on which we hear in the passage from Jeremiah a lovely image of the potter. It is a text that raises perhaps as many questions as it answers. I love the theologically rich metaphor at the heart of this passage, however, and the image of God as an artist who is responsive to God's craft, deeply connected to and engaged in a life-giving reciprocity with the clay, is powerful and compelling to me. Many of us are familiar with the old hymn *Spirit of the Living God* and the lyrics which might well be a potter's creed:

*Spirit of the living God,
Fall afresh on me.
Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.
Spirit of the living God,
Fall afresh on me.*

Implicit in this image of God is, of course, our own response to the work of the Spirit in us, and in our communities of faith—the latter being perhaps the true prophetic dimension to this passage from Jeremiah. We are not empty vessels into which God—having created each of us— simply pours the Spirit. Rather we, like God, have choices, and a responsibility to choose wisely and well in response to the Gifts of the Spirit. This includes the ongoing creative work of God in each of us, and of this community here gathered. I pause here to say that I've only tried the craft of doing pottery a time or two with results that were, let's say, less than satisfying. As I thought about a title for today's homily I finally narrowed my choices down to either "*Treasures in Earthen Vessels*," which I like very much, or the perhaps less prosaic title, "*Cracked Pots I Have Known*." Had I chose the latter, the homily would have by necessity taken a pronounced turn toward the autobiographical, so I chose the former, which brings to mind, of course, the lovely passage from I Corinthians:

But we have this *treasure in earthen vessels*, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

This image of each of us, and of our communities of faith, as flawed but resilient earthen vessels, is powerful indeed. One of my pastoral counseling colleagues, Joe Luther, gave us a lovely wooden bowl carved from an ancient apple tree from his farm in rural North Carolina. Like a potter, Joe turned the wood, creating—resurrecting really—a work of art from a fallen tree. What I love most about this bowl is the beautiful imperfection on the rim, which wood-turners call "burl bowls" due to the twisted and multi-directional grain which gives them their name. In an otherwise perfectly carved and lovingly crafted piece is the reminder of both the gift of life from the Creator, and the flaws and imperfections that can emerge over time, in the messy and difficult brokenness of real life. No potter or wood-turner works aimlessly, but rather is deeply invested in the drawing something useful and life-giving from the clay or the wood. So it is with God, who means to shape

us for purposes and challenges that may often exceed our imagination and vision—and not in spite of but often because of our imperfections. Moreover, the relationship between the artisan and the clay or wood is a dynamic, living relationship. God is not indifferent to the taking shape of our communal and individual lives, but rather is engaged, receptive, and responsive. Begging the question, what is the source of the flaw in the clay to which Jeremiah speaks? I suspect it is always present choice of unfolding resistance of the clay to the potter—and our own resistance to God’s redemptive purposes in our lives.

Finally, there is a point in the creation of a bowl or other object from clay when the future shape of it is set. Communally or individually, these are what we might call “defining moments” in the life of the new creation. Each of us faces choices that will have a profound impact on our future, and that of the communities to which we commit ourselves. At the seminary where I have taught now some 18 years, we are facing profoundly important questions about the future of theological education, in light of declining enrollment in seminaries, the decrease in full-time positions for our graduates, declining membership in mainline denominations, and seminaries around the country that are closing or merging with other institutions. The future of the institution—and many like it—and of our denominations, and congregations, may turn on precedent setting choices made by people of faith. Like a potter, God is determined to shape the emerging work of the church and to respond accordingly. If you hear a note of judgment in the passage from Jeremiah, it is because it is right there in the text. God is deeply concerned, we hear, to shape communities of faith whose distinctive ways of worship are part of God’s redemptive plan. I suspect that without appropriate and clear boundaries, in light of the truth that the choices we make do matter, communities will break down.

And, people do too. I see in my clinical practice folks who have lost their moorings, caught between the Scylla and Charybdis of seemingly insoluble life choices, who do indeed flounder and drift. I’ve been there too. We need persons and institutions in our lives who remind us that God does care about the choices we make in our common life together. At the heart of any 12-step process are a loving, whole-hearted accountability, confession, and forgiveness. It is the journey of human treasures in earthen vessels while naming finitude and fragility and practicing resilience, perseverance, and a restoration to wholeness. I believe that being direct and honest about appropriate accountability and the note of inherent, compassionate judgment that obtains, does not mean that there is not room for hope or compassion. In fact, just the opposite is true. I want persons in my life who hold me accountable because they expect the best from me, and because they love me enough to call me on behavior which falls short. I tell my students each semester to pay attention to the syllabus, and to the instructions it contains. “Do not mistake my compassionate nature as a sign of weakness,” I tell them, “because I care enough about you to hold you accountable to the expectations in this class.” Clay that becomes misshapen, or bowls of wood with imperfections, can be worked into shapes that are pleasing to God and worthy containers of the Spirit. And out of the ruins of a communities’ indifference or self-indulgence a new faithfulness and new usefulness—as Jeremiah tells us—can emerge. I see this happen every day. The divine potter hovers over the world with love, and, as Gerard Manly Hopkins said so well, the *Holy Ghost over the bent world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings*, shaping and reshaping us for our calling as bearers of love, justice, and the blessedly good and important work of our Baptismal prayer: *to go out into the world and respect the dignity of every human being*.

Well, the metaphor of God as a Divine artist is deeply pleasing to me and, it would seem, to Jeremiah too. Remember, dear ones, that we are co-creators with God in the theologically and significant life-giving aesthetic dimensions of our own lives, and the lives of those for whom we care. Yahweh, the God of Israel, Jeremiah, and those here gathered, is here portrayed as an artist—a potter who with compassion, skill, delicate care, and sensitivity forms the human person, and all of Creation and everything in it. Like the people of Israel, we too have been on occasion recalcitrant. We, too, contain flaws and imperfections. In the end, however, we belong to God and our vulnerabilities—as the sociologist and researcher Brené Brown has reminded us—can paradoxically become our strengths. One last time God will make wholeness possible again, because even God can change God’s mind, in response to the dynamic unfolding of creation, and in light of God’s ultimately compassionate relationship to us all. Meanwhile, we proclaim with Jeremiah, *God reworked the clay into another vessel, as seemed good to God*, and with Leonard Cohen:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in.

Amen.

© The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.