



## Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon, the Rev. Dr. David T. Gortner

[Jeremiah 18:1-11](#)

[Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17](#)

[Philemon 1-21](#)

[Luke 14:25-33](#)

Welcome, dear people of God, to this house of prayer, worship, and learning together. Welcome to the beginning of a new school year, and to a return from summer's pleasures.

Today, as I said last week, our readings seem to align more closely with themes of Labor Day, on good work offered, and on good relationships built and rebuilt between people at different levels of work in society. The reading from Luke's gospel this morning is a challenging one, and I'm happy to discuss it more with you after the worship service, but I will only touch on it just a bit now. Because, I find the readings from Jeremiah and Philemon and Psalm 139 to be deeply compelling. So, come with me on a journey. Come with me, my siblings in Christ, to the potter's house. There is the potter, sitting at work at his wheel.

Let me take you with my family and I 15 years ago, driving through the Shenandoah Mountains, taking a little detour to go see a potter's house. The house was full of beautiful pottery – mugs, and bowls, and platters, and pitchers, and sinks. All vessels for daily use, all strong and solid, all glazed with radiant colors. There was a room with three potter's wheels, which the potter used as a classroom to teach others how to throw pots. The potter himself was in another room. He called us back to watch him and to talk with him as he dipped dry fired bowls and cups into a glaze. He gave us a little tour. We saw his two kilns, one stacked four feet deep and 7 feet high with pots recently air-dried and ready for their first firing at 1700 degrees, and the other nearly as full as the first with freshly glazed and ready for their second firing at 2100-2400 degrees.

This is the modern-day potter's house in this country. It's only a little bit different from what one would find at a potter's house in ancient cultures and in societies in other parts of the world today. Heather and I saw such a pottery operation at a cooperative of men and women artisans in the ancient city of Fez in Morocco. There would be clay ready for molding. A wheel for molding or "throwing" pots – so quickly done in the hands of the skilled potter. Stacks of pots air-drying in preparation for the finishing fires of the kiln. And finished wares ready for sale. The fundamentals of the craft have not changed much over thousands of years.

So, allow yourself to consider a potter's house in ancient Israel, during the time of Jeremiah the prophet. We are accompanying Jeremiah to the potter's house to see what God has led him to see.

The potter is at the wheel, attempting to work a clump of clay into a pot.

What we do not see is all that has gone before, and all that will come after, for clay to become ready for molding into a vessel that then will be rendered enduring, useful, and beautiful. Before the potter sits with the clay at the wheel, there is the long path of making the clay.

The critical quality of clay is its plasticity. Its pliability, or moldable quality. Clay bends and gives, but it sticks together. This is what makes it fundamentally different from the loose soil in your garden – even in the “clay” soil of other parts of the country back East and across the South, which is really a mix of different things including some clay – which crumbles and breaks apart easily. Pure clay is also fundamentally different from stone or hard glass which is unyielding unless it is broken.

Clay becomes clay over millennia, in the still, low places of the earth, where water collects and stagnates, where sediments of tiny particles or worn rock drop down and press down into a pasty, slick substance. And then, when it is dug up for use, there is a long, laborious process of preparing it for use for bricks, terra cotta pots and tiles, glazed pots and dishes, and sculpture. It must undergo several stages of cleaning and purification. First, after it is dried a bit, it must be picked clean of obvious larger impurities such as stones, sticks, and other animal or plant remnants. Then, it is broken into smaller pieces to release hidden impurities. Then, it is pulverized into a thick dust, sifted, and swirled in water to allow remaining impurities to float to the top of the water and be poured off. After this, it is laid out to dry partially, to release enough water that it becomes a material that can be molded but will hold its shape.

The ancient potter may well have been involved in preparation of the clay up to this point, in order to ensure just the right quality that he wants to work with. Already, we have hours and even weeks of investment of energy, time, and careful attention.

And now, the clay is in the potter’s hands, being pressed behind and before as it turns on the wheel. Across many cultures and times, the process is the same. Every pot, dish, or jar starts the same way – that clump of clay, centered on the spinning wheel, is first molded into a cylinder. So, the process for this clay begins as with others. The potter applies pressure by hands and various tools to the clay, and the spinning of the wheel keeps the pressure steady on all parts of the clay as it is moved, urged, pressed into a new shape. And this is another great investment of energy and focus by the potter – he must spin the wheel while working to apply steady gentle pressure to the clay – and in earlier societies, and in some less modern societies today, the potter spins the wheel by hand while crouching before it – it was a later development to connect the wheel by rod to a turning wheel for the feet to spin.

The clay is lifted upward, pressed down, narrowed or flattened, and hollowed out into a basic form, usually a core hollow cylinder that varies in size depending on the final vessel the potter wants to make. Then the sides of the vessel are pressed and pulled and pushed gently but persistently into shapes, to make bulging jugs, or wide platters, or rimmed bowls, or straight-sided or rounded cups.

So many mistakes can happen along the way at this point. A novice potter can easily tear a pot on the wheel by being too vigorous, or forget to seal and strengthen a portion of clay that has been stretched, resulting in v-shaped cracks when the pot dries, or overly thin or wet the clay sides resulting in the clay collapsing or folding in on itself.

A skilled potter senses that feeling of clay that is just pliable enough without becoming overly weakened – the skilled potter “listens” to the response of the clay to each touch and press, and responds to the clay in the process of molding it into a desired shape. And, if things begin to go

wrong with a pot, it may be the simplest move to begin again with the clump of clay to make a new vessel.

From here, the pot is taken to a drying rack, where air can move around it freely to ensure even drying. Pots can crack at this stage if they do not dry evenly. None of the pots are usable at this point – they have simply become bisques that are dry enough to be set in the fires of a kiln, where they bake once without glaze, and then again with a glaze.

At the first stage of air-drying, the pots can break easily, but can quickly be turned into clay again. At the second stage of being in the kiln, the pots have been committed, and their structure has become much harder, and if broken they will take a very long time to return again to pliable clay.

So now, we have seen a bit of what Jeremiah has seen. Let's just leave it at this – that the art of pottery is a long, time-intensive, labor-intensive process, from the making and cleaning and preparation of clay from the soil, to the moments on the potter's wheel, to the drying and firing and finishing. Many forces come to bear on the raw material. And all of these forces contribute to making the vessel what it is in the end.

And the key quality of clay is its plasticity – its pliability – that moldable quality that allows for clay to be pressed and poked into different forms and yet still hold together.

We often take the imagery of the potter and clay as a way of describing how God works with us and molds us in the midst of ongoing events of our lives, that turning of the wheel. There is an old American hymn, "Have thine own way, Lord, Have thine own way, Thou are the potter, I am the clay. Mold me and make me, after Thy will, while I am only yielded and still." My mother went to her final surgery in her battle with ovarian cancer singing this hymn. The image of each of us as clay in the hands of a master potter whose love of the clay is felt in every touch that molds, it is an image that helps people grasp what it might mean to let go, to submit to the will of God, and to allow life to unfold with the promise of God's hand to guide and to shape.

But Jeremiah invites us to think on a grander scale than only in the lives of individuals. Jeremiah sees in the potter's work the way God acts in the lives of nations, and institutions, and cities, and households. The word of the Lord to Jeremiah in the potter's house was not about individuals. It was about a whole nation – the house of Israel. We might even think here about this place, this church called St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Coeur d'Alene, and its people and history, as a vessel on the potter's wheel.

In all places, at all moments, at all levels of being, from your individual life and my individual life to our shared common life as members of St. Luke's, as a citizenry of Coeur d'Alene and Post Fall, Kootenai County and the Inland Northwest, as a nation, God the Maker of heaven and earth is active, that artist working with the raw material of who we are and the many forces surrounding and shaping who we are.

And we are at our best when we are like clay, prepared for the experience of being molded and ready to hold the shape we are offered. For clay to become its best, it must be cleaned and made whole, free of interfering material and impurities. Then, it must settle alone for a while to drain

and rest, to reach that most useful, pliable state. In that critical time on the potter's wheel, the potter must work with the clay according to its unique combination of pliability and tensile strength, to make something enduring, useful, and beautiful in form.

One of the tragic reactions of human beings to various circumstances in their lives is hardening. Pharaoh, a leader of a nation, hardened his heart and would not relent, and his stubbornness and pride led to tragedy for his people. The children of Israel became a stiff-necked people and did not heed God's continuing call to change their ways – even in those long final years of the prophet Jeremiah, and shortly after this plea God offers to the nation of Israel to turn and change, Jeremiah is led by God to bring a fired, finished pot to the potter's field and smash it, as a sign to Israel that its hardness of heart had a price.

Here is where we once again need God's gracious intervention. It is all too easy for us as individuals and nations and groups to react against pressures and circumstances in our lives by becoming hardened. In some ways, this can be a good and helpful defense, at least initially. But, as a habit and a practiced way of being, hardness becomes imperviousness and brittleness – “I won't allow the world (or God) to touch me, and I won't let myself out to touch God and the world, and I will not bend.” We, as a people, as a nation, as whatever political party, as a city, as a church community, can lose our flexibility and adaptability, and get stuck in certain assumptions about how life should be and how things are supposed to work. Pliability disappears. We become unthinking bearers of the systems we inhabit, taking on ways of thinking and acting and being without realizing what we have accepted in the process.

It seems that something like this happened to Onesimus the runaway slave and to Philemon the slave-owner. Both of them were caught in a system that was filled with unyielding assumptions about the structure of social order, the right of those with wealth to own other human beings, and the iron enforcement of peace. Onesimus, a desperate man marked as property of another, found his way to Paul. Philemon, a household owner, already a Christian, was probably quite perplexed. The rift between these two human beings had become deeper, and hardness of heart threatened to close any possibility of change.

But pliability and a moldable nature can return. Given space, and time, and trust and rest.

Paul invites Onesimus into a space and relationships that allows Onesimus to discover a new way of being in Christ. Onesimus at the time of Paul's letter is a devoted Christian. In their relationship, both Paul and Onesimus are moved and changed as they yield themselves to the presence of the Holy Spirit. Onesimus chooses to return, an act of astounding courage. Paul steps forward in this letter and presses on Philemon and his household and the household of faith to change as well and to accept Onesimus as a brother.

Space. Time. And the gentle but persistent pressing of God upon this vessel. Change, however subtle, is inevitable if we but yield ourselves to God's touch.

Earlier, I mentioned my mother. Aileen. Aileen arrived, at the end of her life, at a very different place than she expected. Earlier, she was convinced even as the dark cloud of cancer descended

that she knew God's plan for her life. She prayed, and invited others to pray with her, for miraculous healing, so that her life might be a bold witness to the power of God. She also continued to pray that God would make life uncomfortable for her estranged daughter, so that her daughter might discover her need for Christ. She had grown hard in her certainty that she knew God's will and ways of working.

The terrible circumstances of the last weeks of Aileen's life brought her to a new place. Just before her final surgery, when she was wheeled down the hallway singing "Have thine own way, Lord," she spoke with her estranged daughter, my sister, and asked her forgiveness for the prayers she had prayed. This, I have come to realize, is an even more powerful demonstration of how God brought Aileen, my mother, to a new way of being in her final days. In these last hours, Aileen gave up on her way of thinking about how God acted and allowed herself to be molded as a new vessel.

Giving up what we have been attached to, what we think we can control or controls us, what we think we possess or possesses us, what we think absolutely defines our shape and our identity. This is what Jesus is getting at in what we heard him say from Luke's gospel today. Are you ready to commit yourself into God's hands, even if and when it means following the way of the cross, the way of suffering and self-emptying that is the way of Jesus?

This is no small thing, to trust ourselves to some higher power. It is a good and blessed thing that we know that this higher power, Adonai, knows us completely and thoroughly, and loves us, and is close to us wherever we go, and has been intimately involved in shaping us and knitting us together from the very beginning. Just like an ancient potter at all stages of preparing and then molding and then finishing clay into something beautiful and good.

I wonder what awaits you in God's hands, as God uses the forces you encounter in your work, your home, your school, whatever new phase of life is unfolding for you. I wonder what awaits me. I would like to be more welcoming of the possibility of being molded further. I admit, it doesn't entirely thrill me, and I think there continue to be ways I harden myself against the hand of God.

I wonder what awaits this nation, in a time when the world's nations and climate and population growth require adjustments in thinking and re-examination of our assumptions about how we can and should live.

I wonder what awaits this church community, in this time in our place in the Inland Northwest, as we seek to respond to God's prompting and calling.

At all levels – we are on the potter's wheel, clay in varied states before the potter.

What kind of vessel shall we be? What shall the potter make us into, that we may be made anew as enduring, useful, and beautiful, as a witness to the maker who is indeed a most creative potter?

Lord, help us to relax. Help us to allow ourselves to be touched, held, and pressed by you. Help us not simply to resist with hardness of heart and stiff neck, nor merely to cave in without strength to hold the form toward which you press us. You are the potter. We are clay. Purify

and cleanse us. Soften and strengthen us. And then mold us as you will, and help us to listen and respond to your pushes and pulls, so that we may continue to become as you envision for us. Here, as this church of St. Luke's. Here, as this neighborhood and dispersed community in Coeur d'Alene and the surrounding towns in North Idaho and Eastern Washington. Here, as households and families. Here, as individuals. You press us behind and before. It is wonderful to behold.