

## Sermon TSP - Sixteenth After Pentecost - 04 September 2016

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. Then the word of the LORD came to me: Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings. **NRSV Jeremiah 18:1-11**

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother. For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. **NRSV Philemon**

Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions. **NRSV Luke 14:25-33**

### ***“The Hands of the Potter”***

Today there’s a dynamic connection between Jeremiah’s metaphor of the potter and Luke’s hard teaching on giving up everything to follow Jesus, and that connecting thread is the concept of a deep, inner sense of identity as God’s people. Jeremiah talks about God as a potter who reworks a spoiled piece of clay to salvage it - to create something new. This reading sounds horrible at first, but when we understand what Jeremiah is telling us, it gets much better. God threatens to shape evil against God’s people in response to them becoming something other than the faithful servants of redemption that God had created them to be. So God breaks the original piece of art and re-shapes it. Jeremiah is a prophet speaking God’s judgement here, but Dr. Matt Skinner warns us not to miss the good news - when we turn away from the sin that’s destroying what God created, God’s shaping of us will change too. God’s formation of us, like a potter at the wheel, responds to our state of faithfulness, and within the horizons of time, God’s response to us bends and shifts according to how we need to be formed and re-formed. The purpose of God’s judgement is to bring about a positive change - to

return us to our most faithful selves when we wander off in hubris and pride, and once that return comes, the judgement is lifted - this is not a permanent punishment, it's a painful but life-giving re-creation of us in God's image. There's a great illustration of this in C.S. Lewis' Narnia Chronicles. Remember what happens in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*? Eustace Clarence Scrubb, *a selfish mess of a boy*, was turned into a dragon when his greed got the better of him. At his most desperate, the great Lion Aslan came to him, threw him into the water, and told him to wash until the dragon skin finally peeled off. He needed Aslan's help to be re-created into an honest, humble boy, and the process of 'de-dragoning' really stung, but in the end, he was restored to the person he was meant to be. That's a beautiful picture of the Divine Potter re-creating the clay when the vessel becomes so corrupted that it needs to be broken before it can be remade. God sees through our layers of self, and sees that original creation and reaches for it. Martin Laird, a monk with the Order of Saint Augustine, illustrates this another way in his book, *A Sunlit Absence*. He talks about how God works on our inner selves in contemplative prayer - as we let go, we're freed up to allow ourselves to be sculpted into a masterpiece. He says, "*According to ancient theory of art, the practice of sculpting has less to do with fashioning a figure of one's choosing than with being able to see in the stone the figure waiting to be liberated. The sculptor imposes nothing but only frees what is held captive in stone.*" That's what God the potter is doing with God's people in this metaphor - seeing the real you and me through all those layers and obstacles we pile on over the years, chipping away at that, breaking off the rubble to reveal the full range of our human potential - to pull us back in love to all that we were created to be. *There's where our identity lies, deep within, as God's wonderful, intentional creation.*

And Luke carries on with this challenge to identify our true identity, with all this talk about leaving people - leaving loved ones - leaving everything and everybody behind if we want to follow Christ. The language is harsh here - does Jesus really call us into *hate*? Well, we know the answer to that - we know that if we look at the sweep of scripture and tradition and reason, the opposite is true. Jesus calls us to love. So how are we supposed to interpret this difficult gospel? Barbara Brown Taylor, my favourite Episcopalian teacher, says that if you frisk any one of us Christians you'll find two passports in our pockets - one representing our citizenship in God's kingdom, and the other representing the fact that we are taxpayers here on earth. So there we have this duality of identity - this tension between who God calls us to be, and what this world and the people around us expect us to be. We can't really learn anything from this passage without looking into the nuances of the Greek word used for hate. The semantic range the Greek word covers does not convey the same meaning as our understanding of that word. We're not supposed to hate our family. Luke uses this rhetoric to make a strong case for simply loving God more. Remember the excuses the disciples used when Jesus said "Follow me"? *I'll be right with you - just give me some time to make sure my Dad's all set. Or Coming, Jesus - right after I say my goodbyes.* Does that sound familiar? Let's be honest - how many times have we used this ourselves? *"Oh sorry, I can't - I've got a family thing - you know!"* In this story, Jesus pushes us to figure out our priorities, and to decide who we really are. Where do our loyalties lie? Do we hide behind earthly obligations to avoid thinking about what God might be asking us to do, or to say, or to give? What defines our true identity? Which of those two passports do we really claim as our own?

There's good news underneath these difficult readings from Jeremiah and Luke, because here's the thing ... those firm hands of the divine potter may sting, and that harsh warning not to bury God's call underneath

family obligations may seem impossible, but they lead us to this one beautiful thing....they bring us the healing we all need in so many ways. In fact, Jesus is the very locus of God's healing of the world. Healing is something that's often terribly misunderstood in our Western context, partly thanks to the wild claims of some of the Televangelists and charlatans who rave loudly and ask for money. They make it all about a magical cure, but with Jesus, our healing is much more nuanced than that. Healing comes to us on many levels, and the physical is only one of them. In Jesus, our healing is about the integration of body, mind and spirit which can become so fragmented for us. It's about letting go of grudges and alienation and arguments and suspicion and fear. It's about turning from bitterness and embracing gratitude. It's about reconciliation and forgiveness. I was talking about this with my dear friend, Deanna. She was lamenting the frantic way we live in most of North America...how we seem to shorten our lives with unrealistic expectations and stress - how we're driven to accomplish so much, to gather and hoard possessions, to keep running, to turn away from the suffering around us because we can't process it. It's exhausting and depressing to live this way. This too, is what Jesus comes to heal, and here's the irony....it's tough to submit to the potter's shaping - it's hard to put faithfulness first - but when we do, things are less exhausting, more rewarding - it becomes less of a game and more like a life.

Our healing is not about being good - it's not about being pious and behaving properly. Remember that Jesus had little patience with the 'piety police' who made it their priority to follow the rules. Healing is about fully living, breathing, seeing the world as it really is, and responding to it with grace. And we can experience that healing without instant cures - while we're dealing with physical ailments or mental illness - we can be healed even at the moment of our death. Mary Charbonneau has completed - with flying colours, according to the leaders - our Diocesan training course for Lay Anointers. A Lay Anointer is a person of prayer who trusts in this healing mystery of grace that Jesus brings, and shares it with us. In October we'll begin a monthly service which offers anointing and praying for healing, which will happen during the Prayers of the People. On the last Sunday of the month, the person scheduled for the prayers will read a short litany of healing with responses, and then I'll invite people forward who would like to ask God for healing in body, mind, spirit or relationships. While we sing a Taize song, those who come forward will be asked the question, "What do you ask of the Lord?" And your response can be as simple as "I ask the Lord for healing" or you may put it in your own words. Mary or I will anoint you with a short prayer. This practice is very Anglican - very traditional. It's a response to the instruction of the disciples who said, in James 5:14 .... *"Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord."* It's quite as simple as that, and you know, a lot of people find that when they do come forward and just say something out loud, it opens them up to grace in a new way. The faith of our fellow Christians praying for us somehow strengthens our own faith. I'll be talking more about the Christian healing ministry between now and then. But as we leave this place today, let's remember Eustace Clarence Scrubb, being liberated from the dragon skin by the firm hands of the loving Lion. And we must ask ourselves....what is it for us? What are the layers of hubris and obligation and blindness that have buried our true identity as Christ followers? Can we submit to the healing hands of the divine potter who wants to break off what's killing us and return us to our authentic identity? My friends, we need not fear the potter. We need not fear our healing. Because no matter how many layers we've collected, God sees through them. God remembers who we are and what we were created to become. *Thanks be to God! Amen.*