

The message of Jeremiah can be very challenging to hear. Last Sunday we heard the painful words that God’s people were exchanging their glorious God for worthless idols. Next week we hear about the disturbing de-creation of the earth which becomes “formless and void,” the same phrase that describes the earth in Genesis 1 before God begins to create. The message from the potter’s house is really the best news of the three, because God gives his people another chance to repent and turn from their evil ways, if they will.

We are people who like to be in control. But the problem with being in control is it that it leads to inflexibility and resistance to change. Remember the Swiss? They were the world’s leaders in producing the best watches money could buy. When digital watches were introduced the Swiss refused to make them. The Japanese then became the world’s leader in making watches and many watch making companies in Switzerland went out of business.

We humans have a tendency to believe that we are masters of our own fate. We don’t really believe that God intervenes in our lives and helps to shape us. We would rather be in total control of our lives instead of acknowledging or yielding to the creative hands of God. But things can and do change.

In the post-Civil War era, when Charles W. Eliot was president of Harvard University, he had occasion to dedicate a new hall of philosophy. He searched for an appropriate inscription to place above its entrance. He called together his faculty members and after much deliberation they agreed upon the well-known Enlightenment phrase, “Man is the measure of all things.” With that, they adjourned for the summer. When school reopened in the fall, they were surprised to find that the president had decided upon a different inscription. Instead of the human centered inscription, “Man is the measure of all things,” he inscribed a more prayerful inscription from the Psalm 8. He chose, “*What is man that Thou art mindful of him?*” And in case you’re wondering, the inscription from Psalm 8 is still on Emerson Hall of Philosophy today. (© 2001, Keith Wagner)

The Lord said through Jeremiah to the Israelites, “*Like the clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel.*” In other words, God wants us to be like clay, pliable and flexible, in a constant process of being shaped, molded and reworked when necessary. We are essentially clay in the hands of God, but we resist the Master Potter. And when we are unwilling to trust that God can make something out of nothing, God is frustrated with us. We end up doing or being what we want rather than what God wants. We choose rebellion over repentance.

If you’ve ever seen children playing with PlayDoh. They usually start by taking a small quantity and roll it with their hands. They make a long worm of one color. Then they take other colors and do the same, but after a while they get bored. Before long they take all the colors and mix them together. They end up with a big blob of blended colors and most children are pleased with their creation. This is more exciting than making worms of a single color. Rather than see their creation as a single, sterile, boring piece of PlayDoh, they create a colorful glob and seem content with the results.

For thousands of years potters played a major role in Israel's culture. The potter was a chief artisan in every village until the industrial revolution decided to mass produce pottery. They made the pots and pans of antiquity plus helping to make bricks, roof tiles, drainpipes, beehives, writing materials, kilns and ovens (Biblical Archaeological Reader 4:214 ff).

Jeremiah is told to go to the potter's house and Yahweh will speak to him. So Jeremiah hikes across Jerusalem and stands to watch the potter. This is what Yahweh reveals to him: Whenever a piece of pottery is spoiled in the potter's hand, he takes the clay and remakes it into something else. He doesn't toss it away but throws it into another lump on the wheel and starts again.

This is the message Jeremiah receives from the Lord: "*Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?*" If you have ever watched a potter at work, she takes the red clay, puts it on a slab and spins it around, constantly using her hands to shape it. At one point the object may look like a bowl, then before your eyes it turns into a vase. The potter lovingly molds the clay until every imperfection is gone. She then sculpts beautiful designs to add a finishing touch. Every object she creates is the result of a process, making from a mound of clay a beautiful work of art.

I remember when McDonald's used to sell nothing but hamburgers, shakes and fries. But, eventually they learned they have to adjust to the market and constantly reshape their menu in order to meet the demands of people today by adding salads, snacks and sides. Unlike the Swiss who were unwilling to make changes, McDonald's has gone with the flow.

When I was in college I thought I should become a clinical psychologist so I studied psychology and human behavior. God, however, had other plans for me and for a while I resisted the direction that God wanted me to go. I finally gave in, allowed God to shape me instead of following a path that was directed more by societal pressure and a desire for a prestigious line of work. The end result has been thirty six years in ministry. We are all creatures of habit, keeping traditions and following known patterns. But history tells us it is those who are willing to venture out, take risks or bend the rules to produce new results. Sometimes it happens intentionally, sometimes it happens by accident.

John Maxwell tells the true story about the time a soccer game was played between two schools in England. During the closing minutes of the contest, a boy, more gifted with enthusiasm than experience, was sent into the game for the first time. Forgetting all the rules, particularly the one that says a player does not touch the ball with his hands, the boy picked up the ball and to the amazement of everyone, sprinted toward the goal. The officials were confused and the rest of the players stood, frozen. But, the spectators were so moved by the boy's spirit and entertained by his performance they stood up and applauded. The incident totally eclipsed the rest of the game's action. As a result, a new sport was born. Rugby. Sometimes spontaneity produces incredible results. (from *Something Else to Smile About* by Zig Ziglar)

It's not easy to be "clay" in the Potter's hands. Change makes us fearful and we can't always see ourselves becoming something new or different. Parents must adjust to children leaving the nest. Partners have to adjust to the different stages of life. Communities have to adjust to the changes within their

neighborhoods. The Church has to change too, allowing God to be the Master Shaper rather than always trying to have it our way. Most people are conditioned to behave a certain way, to conform to the trends and expectations of culture. The majority of the human race is constantly trying to do “what everybody else is doing.” That unfortunately produces many unhappy and unfulfilled people, not to mention many who put themselves deeply in debt.

All of us are clay, clay with imperfections, lumps, and impurities. It is the Master Potter, however, who can ultimately determine what the final product looks like. Our role is to let God shape our lives, perhaps slowly as we proceed through the stages of life. It is our willingness to let God do God’s handiwork that will enable us to live our lives to their fullest potential.

I don’t believe that God has an unalterable *plan* for our lives. Yet, God does have a *purpose* for each one of us. It seems that every time God has a plan for us we go and foul it up with our sin—sometimes we do that daily. So God tries again: Plan B. With some of us, God is quite a ways down the alphabet—maybe Plan T, U or V. Yet God’s ultimate *purpose* for us is unchanged. God decided long ago to do something for us and with us. God doesn’t throw us away when we sin. God calls us to repentance so that he can start over with us.

When we’re bitter, hateful, depressed or guilty, when we’re feeling like a useless lump of clay, that’s when we need to trust the forgiving cosmic Artist. God gives us another chance. God has another design to impress on us. Such is the vision Jeremiah saw when he went to the potter’s house. Potters are serious about their creations. They work with a purpose in mind, and one flawed piece of clay isn’t going to stop them. They’ll start over again. So does God.

God will give the lump of our life another design, another form, another use. God won’t give up on us. To God, we are infinitely valuable and worth all the trouble. Rather than be in total control of our lives, God wants us to be willing to be shaped. That’s where *repentance* comes into the picture. When we turn toward God, we allow the Master Artist do his work with us. Each one of us is a labor of love in the hands of the Master Potter. For God is actively at work in and through us. It is we who let go of God, not God who lets go of us.

Our lives may turn out differently than we expected, nevertheless, we can trust that in the end God will create nothing less than a human being made in God’s image. Verses 7 and 8 say: “*If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.*” The phrase that I like the best in those verses is when God says “*at any time,*” meaning maybe this very moment. It could be immediately. God will attempt something new the moment we let God have another try with our lumpy, imperfect lives. Amen.