

Communion Meditation – The Potter’s Wheel

Sunday, September 8, 2019

Scripture Readings: Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18, Jeremiah 18:1-11

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Our first scripture is Psalm 139: verses 1-6 and 13-18. In this familiar hymn, the psalmist affirms the intimacy of the God who knows us and who creates us. As for the actual activity of creating, the psalmist uses not the more familiar image of God as potter, which is today’s Old Testament reading, but rather God as weaver and knitter. With gratitude and humility, the psalmist affirms that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. This is the Word of God.

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

<sup>2</sup>You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.

<sup>3</sup>You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

<sup>4</sup>Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely.

<sup>5</sup>You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

<sup>6</sup>Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.

<sup>14</sup>I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works;

that I know very well. <sup>15</sup>My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. <sup>16</sup>Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.

In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.

<sup>17</sup>How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

<sup>18</sup>I try to count them—they are more than the sand;

I come to the end—I am still with you. Amen.

Our second scripture is Jeremiah 18:1-11. Jeremiah served as a prophet to Israel and Judah during the sixth century BCE prior to the Babylonian Exile. This is the account of Jeremiah watching a potter work with clay, which then provides an analogy to explore God’s relationship with the Israelites. Hear now, God’s holy and creative word.

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: <sup>2</sup>“Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” <sup>3</sup>So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>Then the word of the LORD came to me: <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>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. Amen.

The title of the meditation: The Potter's Wheel

The text. Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words."  
Jeremiah 18:2

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, we are the clay and you are the potter. Give us the grace and humility of those who understand our lives and our community are the work of your hand. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our redeemer. Amen.

Today, we journey with the prophet Jeremiah to the Potter's House and observe the work of the potter's wheel in reshaping spoiled clay into a new vessel. The occasion provides an opportunity for us to reflect on our relationship to God in the context of the potter metaphor.

Dr. Lauren Winner, an Episcopal priest, author, and Assistant Professor of Christian Spirituality at Duke Divinity School, explores the surprising truth behind the Bible's many metaphors for God in a recent interview following the publication of her book, Wearing God. "One of the reasons the Bible gives us so many different metaphors for God," she contends, "is to remind us that no single one of these images is going to capture all of who God is. We constantly are being invited by the Scriptures to have our own assumptions checked and our own imaginations expanded around who God actually is and what God is like. When we focus on just a few of these images, we limit our imagination about who God might be."

The metaphor of God as the potter affirms that God is about change, redemption, process, interaction, reworking, and beginning again. The Potter God who formed Adam from the earth 'humus' into a human being in Genesis 2 is the Potter God who continues the work of creation by reshaping and reforming the clay of Israel in Jeremiah 18.

God, who is conceived of as a potter is at work forming the clay, which has its own resiliency in the process of formation. Clay is far from a passive substance in pottery, according to Old Testament Theologian Dr. Thomas Dozeman, and the result of this is a constant interchange between the fingers of the potter and the properties of the clay. This analogy emphasizes the interaction between the potter and the clay and God's power to stay with the process of formation. The metaphor of the potter and clay is a message of hope. Just as clay is reworked in the hands of a skilled potter, so humanity can be steadfastly reshaped by God.

As we begin a new year at Westminster in the formation of our children's faith, in the molding of our youth's spiritual lives, and in the shaping of the lives of our adults through worship, life-long learning, service and ministry opportunities, the metaphor of God as the potter is timely and a propos. We look forward to the creative, useful and beautiful lives which are being drawn forth and created by the potter bent to the wheel, clay spattered from head to foot, strong and sensitive hands pressing and shaping the spinning clay into a superb form with wonderful symmetry.

As much as the metaphor envisions the divine-human relationship on the individual level, the prophet Jeremiah is primarily addressing the life of the called community.

According to the Rev. Dr. Sally Brown, Preaching Professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, the metaphor continues to spin fresh theological insights about the interplay of the ongoing creative work of God in human affairs and a congregation's common life. Like the potter intent

on drawing a useful vessel from the clay, God is deeply invested in our common life. The potter does not work aimlessly, nor does God. Every turn of the wheel matters. God means to shape us for purposes that often exceed our vision and imagination. Furthermore, the relationship between potter and clay, divine artisan and called community is robustly dynamic. As a potter is not indifferent to the condition of the clay, so God is not indifferent to the way our collective life is taking shape. Finally, there is a point in the process of raising a pot from the wheel when the clay is hard and its future shape is set. For communities of faith, too, there are watershed moments when the congregation faces choices that will have a profound impact on its future. For Westminster, such reforming choices have spanned our history including the commitment of our abolitionist founders, the call of pastors who break the mold of traditional expectations, and our decision to remain steadfast in this neighborhood.

How grateful we are for the skillful, creative and dedicated potter who hovers over us, shaping and reshaping us, as individuals and a community of faith, for the high calling as clay footed vessels of divine love and justice. Jeremiah has gifted us with the image of God up to the elbows in our making and remaking. The psalmist affirms that the One whose thoughts we are unable to comprehend is with us to the end. And as we gather at the Communion table, we contemplate and we marvel, with gratitude, humility and joy, at the gift of the potter who became clay, that the beloved clay itself might express the potter's own heart and will. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on each one of us. Amen.