

SHAPED BY GOD'S LOVE

JEREMIAH 18:1-11

SEPTEMBER 9, 2007—RALLY DAY

THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Before God was anything else—judge, advocate, or lover-then-jealous-husband as Hosea says—God was an inspired artist making heavens, earth and life upon the earth.

We have been blessed in recent months to have heard tribute paid to this great artist/creator God in our choir's glorious rendition of Hayden's oratorio, "The Creation"; and also in our co-sponsored production here with New Hope Baptist Church of Tim Kennedy's stirring performance of James Weldon Johnson's "Creation."

"Up from the riverbed God scooped the clay," says Johnson in his immortal poem, "and by the bank of the river this great God like a mammy bending over her baby, kneeled down toiling over a lump of clay till he shaped it in his own image; then blew into it the breath of life."

Not only was James Weldon Johnson a poet, diplomat and one time president of the NAACP, that image suggests he was a pretty darn good biblical scholar as well.

Old Testament expert Walter Brueggemann says the Hebrew word for "formed," from Genesis 2:7, that inspired that portion of Johnson's poem conveys not creation-by-dictum which much of the Genesis narrative is; but hands-on creation—engagement with the raw stuff out of which the object is shaped.

The image of an artist, of a writer bending over her desk, a painter over her easel, a mammy over her baby is an apt description for the care and attention the bible says God gave to making man and woman.

You see, when it comes to human creation, God takes matters into his own hands, shapes us until he is satisfied; no, until he is delighted.

Like Hemingway drafting thirty-nine endings to *For Whom the Bell Tolls* until he found the right one; or Luciano Pavarotti, of blessed memory, who was always finding ways to get his performance of great opera just the way he wanted—we are precious creations of God made with the care and devotion of a master artist.

When it came to the mountains and valleys God said, "Let it be so" but when it came to human beings God took us into the palm of his hand and labored over us until his heart was filled with joy. Psalm 139 which says God knows us better than we ourselves makes perfect sense.

I'd like to talk with you today about God's ongoing forming of us into his church and people—a seminal theme of Scripture and at this juncture for the church in America, for this church, and perhaps for you today—compelling good news.

Maybe you've noticed we're referring to our educational programs as "spiritual formation." The aim of everything we do here is to let God continue the process of shaping and forming us into his people and church.

If you are a visitor or long time member at this new beginning of another year Jeremiah's vision of God the potter is the perfect story today.

A lump of wet clay is not a bad place to pick up the story. Sometime at the beginning of the late sixth century BCE—Egypt and Babylon—were working out their politics and battle plans on the tiny land bridge called Israel. Because of Israel's strategic location she was destined to play a key role being friendly or hostile to the superpower of the day. Her survival depended on reading which superpower's fortunes were rising and which falling.

And this was the task of the prophets. Prophets were not political pundits but God's representatives who divined how the faithfulness or stubbornness of the people boded for the nation's future. From Jeremiah's point of view things did not look good for God's people—so bullheaded and decadent had they become. The *Cliff Notes* version of Jeremiah's message this morning goes something like this: "The king of Babylon will surely come and destroy this land."

Nor did Israel's kings often like what her prophets had to say. So Zedekiah, ignoring Jeremiah's warning, foolishly casts his lot with Egypt only to see Pharaoh's armies crushed by the Babylonian military machine.

The lesson God was trying to teach Judah—apart from the fact that her debauchery was reprehensible to him and to her destiny as his people—was to listen to him to find her way back to honor and statehood and ultimately his plan for blessing the human family.

But Judah's fears caused her to turn a deaf ear to Jeremiah's pleadings. She was caught between her fear of annihilation on the one hand and her desire to control her fate on the other hand—perhaps you've been there too. I certainly have.

And this is where the lump of clay comes in. So paralyzed is Zedekiah after Egypt's defeat by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, who then laid siege at the gates of Jerusalem, that Zedekiah drags discredited Jeremiah from prison and begs his prayers for the nation. Judah and her leaders are like a lump of clay; frozen like a deer in the headlights.

And who here hasn't been so surrounded by troubles that you didn't have a clue which way to turn? We start second-guessing ourselves. I'll bet some of us have even prayed that old prayer, "God if you get me out of this mess, I'll do anything you ask."

At this point Jeremiah shares what he's learned from visiting the potter's house. God is the potter, we are clay; God uses the raw stuff of our lives to transform us.

That Hebrew word for "formed"? It means bringing into reality what the artist imagines: a painting from a palette of colors; a person made whole again from a fractured life; a nation restored to solidarity and justice.

Perhaps you had a chance to see our potter at work this morning in Parish Hall. Or maybe you've even had a chance to throw a few pots on a wheel yourself.

It's an unforgettable experience, cupping your hands over that wonderfully soft substance called clay. The potter's hands are the key—using the force of the spinning wheel we might call the forces of change in our lives, a bad diagnosis, a job loss, a Babylonian conqueror at the gate—to transform an ill-shaped even ugly mass of human circumstances into something useful if not beautiful.

Just when life starts flying apart—bits and pieces of us going in all directions—the loving hands of God surround us, Jeremiah says, and not only keep us from disintegrating but reshape us and our circumstances.

My guess is this might come as good news to some of us this morning—at the start of a new church year, back to school and work routines. What Jeremiah is saying if we could only hear it is that our relationship to God is a hands-on relationship, close and personal.

This is not some distant, watch-maker God but a robust, life affirming God dreaming dreams for us and his church that will maximize our strengths and utilize our gifts and transform our worst mistakes into his works of glory.

Notice without the spinning wheel no pots can be made. So without that constant force of change and even crisis in our lives we can't be reshaped. Crisis and change humbles and reminds us we are made of clay but if we let him God uses this unglamorous substance to make something holy.

This story is as much about us as clay as it is God as potter. The obligation, if you will, of clay is willingness to be shaped into something we may not be able to see but which the one shaping us surely can and does see—as St. Paul said we are being formed into the likeness of Christ. No more “God if you get me out of this mess” deals but prayers like “thy will be done” and “let me be an instrument of thy peace.”

The message God gave Jeremiah is simple—if we let go of the urge to control our lives, especially when we need help, if we listen to God and let him shape us our broken world and churches and families can be made whole again.

This is a message of redemption, exchanging something flawed for something new. It occurs at mid-point in Jeremiah and offers a choice: either we adopt a flexible spirit and let our life take on new contours and behaviors or we reap the consequences of distrusting God's dream for us: for which an angry Nebuchadnezzar may not be so bad an image.

Shift with me for a moment to something that is broken: the modern church. From Roman Catholic to Presbyterian to Southern Baptist congregations Al Winseman, a Methodist pastor who has led large congregations and consults with the Gallup Poll on religious matters documents disturbing trends in membership, giving and mission.

The problem, Winseman says, is that we are preoccupied with the needs of the institution, not the needs of the people. The church as a nurturing, engaged, life-affirming, relationship-building community is increasingly rare.

By asking members about their level of connectedness, sense of purpose, concern for spiritual growth and use of their gifts Winseman is able to assess the depth of community in congregations which, in turn, predicts their strength for attracting, teaching and sending people into mission.

I believe Al Winseman's message is on point. There are exceptions to the rule but the rule is a calcified, going-through-the-motions modern church that is hemorrhaging members and resources. Name the denomination and look at the statistics.

So at this start of a new year, with mission projects galore and campaigns pending Winseman's plea is an important reminder to us to focus on building community, strengthening our relationships and listening for the Spirit in our midst.

It is a bit counter-intuitive at the start of a busy church year but perhaps more than "doing" anything it's just as important for us to cultivate the ability to be still and know that God is God and simply love our neighbor.

What would that look and feel like? I have a hunch it would look something like the early church—a community without investment portfolios and stained glass windows but with members reaching out to one another and those to whom no one reached out. A community willing to experiment in any way the Spirit led them with God's radical love demonstrated in Jesus. A community we still look to and use as the standard.

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles describes that church this way: "they devoted themselves to the Apostles' instruction, to their common life together, to the breaking of bread, and to prayers for healing and justice. Those who believed shared all in common; dividing everything on the basis of each one's need."

Churches open to God's shaping influence are churches that move beyond checklist religion and calculated commitment. Such communities, like clay on a potter's wheel enveloped by the potter's hands, are what I hear the Spirit of God calling the church, this church—you and me, to be.

And at the personal level? Is the earthen vessel of your life filled with holy treasure or do you sometimes feel empty and fractured? Every once in a while I meet someone in the congregation who says something like this:

"I'm sorry you haven't seen me lately, but I have gotten to where I just can't come to church anymore. I don't know what happens. I come in, get a bulletin and sit down. Then the choir starts singing or you read a passage of Scripture and the floodgates open. I'm in tears."

You see, I believe those tears are a sign of God stirring within a human life. In a way that's where it all starts, says Jeremiah, when we feel like emotional putty.

So don't be afraid if you're feeling overwhelmed with a new fall season or apprehensive about some expected or unexpected change taking place.

God is bending over you, toiling amidst the circumstances of your life, reaching into your heart to shape you into the likeness of Christ.

It is a hands-on God who made us and makes us still. Amen.