

“The Potter and the Clay”

Meditation Preached by The Rev. Jennifer Cameron

June 6, 2021 – St. Columba Presbyterian Church, Belleville

Hymns for Worship Video – June 6, 2021

“Spirit of the Living God” #400 in the Book of Praise Vv. 1&2

V. 2 words by Michael Baughen, found in the Book of Praise

V. 1 Spirit of the living God

Fall afresh on me

Spirit of the living God

Fall afresh on me

Melt me mould me

Fill me use me

Spirit of the living God

Fall afresh on me

V. 2 Spirit of the living God

Move among us all

Make us one in heart and mind

Make us one in love

Humble caring

Selfless sharing

Spirit of the living God

Fill our lives with love

Daniel Iverson

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“I, the Lord of Sea and Sky” #592 in the Book of Praise Vv. 1-3

V. 1 I the Lord of sea and sky

I have heard my people cry

All who dwell in dark and sin

My hand will save

I who made the stars of night

I will make their darkness bright

Who will bear my light to them

Whom shall I send

Refrain:

Here I am Lord
It is I Lord
I have heard you calling in the night
I will go Lord
If you lead me
I will hold your people in my heart

V. 2 I the Lord of snow and rain
I have borne my people's pain
I have wept for love of them
They turn away
I will break their hearts of stone
Give them hearts for love alone
I will speak my word to them
Whom shall I send

Refrain

V. 3 I the Lord of wind and flame
I will tend the poor and lame
I will set a feast for them
My hand will save
Finest bread I will provide
Till their hearts be satisfied
I will give my life to them
Whom shall I send

Refrain

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"Praise, my Soul, the King of Heaven" #407 in the Book of Praise Vv. 1-4
V. 4 from the Book of Praise

V. 1 Praise my soul the King of heaven
To His feet thy tribute bring
Ransomed healed restored forgiven
Who like thee His praise should sing
Praise Him Praise Him
Praise Him Praise Him
Praise the everlasting King

V. 2 Praise Him for His grace and favour
To our fathers in distress
Praise Him still the same forever
Slow to chide and swift to bless
Praise Him Praise Him
Praise Him Praise Him
Glorious in His faithfulness

V. 3 Father-like He tends and spares us
Well our feeble frame He knows
In His hands He gently bears us
Rescues us from all our foes
Praise Him Praise Him
Praise Him Praise Him
Widely as His mercy flows

V. 4 Frail as summer's flower we flourish
Blows the wind and it is gone
But while mortals rise and perish
God endures unchanging on
Praise Him Praise Him
Praise Him Praise Him
Praise with us the God of grace

Henry Francis Lyte / John Goss
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Closing Chorus "Walk with the Lord"

Walk with the Lord
Go from this place
filled with his everlasting grace.
Walk with the Lord
Go where he leads
blessed by his love and his peace

Each day you live in all you do
let the light of Christ be found in you
Walk with the Lord
Trust and obey
Go now and serve him in faith
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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Scripture Texts: Psalm 139:1-18

- ¹ O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
³ You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.
⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.
⁷ Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
⁹ If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"
¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.
¹³ For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
¹⁶ 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.
¹⁷ How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
¹⁸ I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end—I am still with you.

Jeremiah 18:1-11

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: ²“Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” ³So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴The 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.

⁵Then the word of the Lord came to me: ⁶Can 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. ⁷At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸but 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. ⁹And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰but 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. ¹¹Now, 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.

Meditation

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last week we began to spend some time in the book of Jeremiah, the young prophet whose messages to Israel were both *destructive* and *constructive*. He had to bring a dire warning to God’s people – change your ways so that God can be present in your place of worship. Jeremiah stood on the steps of the Temple to preach this message, as the people were entering for worship, so it would have stood out as being somewhat jarring, for those who paid him any attention. It was a tough message both for preacher and hearer.

When God first spoke to Jeremiah, the young lad gave his reason why he couldn’t do what God was appointing him to do – too young, not a good public speaker. But God knew otherwise and told him he was appointed to this role before he was born. In other words, Jeremiah was born with a purpose, and shaped to fulfill that purpose. God created him to be a prophet. As the Psalmist wrote: *you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.* Well, this young man was wonderfully made to serve God as a prophet. So a prophet he was.

Today’s reading from Jeremiah uses the image of the potter and the clay. We know the image well. The potter sits at the wheel, spinning, molding, shaping the clay into something beautiful. If it doesn’t go well, if it doesn’t take the right shape or there is a design flaw, the potter has the option to crush the clay down and start over. The clay can be shaped and re-shaped until it is what the potter had in mind.

Our family likes to watch the show “Forged in Fire.” It’s such an interesting thing to watch the smiths create amazing things from pieces of steel. When they have their materials,

they get to work, heating, hammering, shaping, sharpening and grinding steel into blades, handles and decorative pommels. Sometimes a smith realizes the process of drawing out the blade and shaping it into the specific parameters they have been given isn't going according to plan, so they have to start again, or, they can reheat the steel to reshape it. When they finally have what they want, mostly, they quench the blade in oil to harden the steel as it has been formed. What starts as something plain and boring – a pile of steel bits – becomes some of the most beautifully crafted artwork. I am so amazed at how the smiths can shape something into what they envision in their minds.

Pottery is somewhat different from forging steel, but they are both about taking something ordinary and plain and turning it into something useful and/or beautiful. It is about working and re-working, shaping and re-shaping, and once the final product is ready, protecting it from someone trying to rework it into something it was not meant to be. It is what amazes me about anything artistic – the creation of something beautiful out of something I may perceive to be plain. Is that how God sees me? As I am shaped and re-shaped, refined and refined again, is God taking something I perceive to be plain and creating something beautiful? I guess that is a question only God can answer, but it's an interesting thought.

It's also a theological thought. God takes us as we are, and creates whatever the Creator has envisioned us to be. We are made into people who fulfill the purpose for which we are created. And what is that? Well, perhaps the historic shorter catechism can help us here. The first question is: What is our chief end? The answer: To glorify God, and to enjoy God forever. Our chief end, our highest purpose, the thing we most value in and of itself, is to give God all glory, and to enjoy, love, revel in God forever. That's why we were created. As Martin Luther said: God doesn't love us because of our worth, we are of worth because God loves us.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

I praise you, for you aren't finished working with me yet.

William Willimon, in his book, *Shaped by the Bible*, called the closing chapter "Formed and Ever Reformed by the Bible." He writes, "...this Word among us is no merely confirming, comforting word. The Bible is not only forming us but also reforming us, making us over, over and over again, into people who more closely resemble the family whom God's righteousness demands.

"Conversation overheard on Parent's Weekend on our campus:

'Well, your son is twenty-one. It must be great to at last be done with him.'

'I can tell you have never been a mother,' said the other person. 'I will not be done with him until I die.'

"Fortunately for the church, God is not yet done with us."¹

God is not yet done with us. What a relief. If I were to remain the same as I am today for the rest of my existence, my existence wouldn't last long. Each day I mature – not in the sense that children go through the natural process of maturation into adulthood – but in the sense that each day I learn and grow. Each day I become a little more knowledgeable, a little older – and

¹ Willimon, William H. *Shaped by the Bible*. Abingdon Press, Nashville TN, 1990, Pp. 83-84.

hopefully wiser! – a little closer to God through my study, reading, worship and prayer. This is not necessarily a conscious process, but it is the way God is still working with me. It is the way God constantly works and re-works, shapes and re-shapes me. I am “tweaked” with every decision I make, every conversation I have, every sermon I prepare, every task I fulfill. I am changed with every success and failure, every joy and sorrow, every laugh and every tear. We are in a constant process of being formed and re-formed. We are in the divine Potter’s hands.

In reading Jeremiah’s story today, we see that being in the Potter’s hands isn’t necessarily easy. The process of being re-shaped and re-formed is hard on us. The Hebrew Bible Scholar whose work I’ve been reading while preparing this sermon series writes the following about the image of the Potter and the clay:

“In this scene at the potter’s house, Jeremiah observes the painstaking process of pottery making (18:4). The potter revises and reworks the clay quite frequently before settling on a finished product. The observation of the potter, here a symbol (18:1-4) points to the possibility of starting over again when things go wrong. However, the conclusion of the interpretation of the sign (18:11) suggests impending destruction rather than creation. Jeremiah hears a word that interprets the potter’s work as an act of dominance over the clay and yet at the same time it appears that the clay has a will of its own (18:6). The clay is not always responsive to the potter’s molding and in fact, frustrates [the] potter forcing constant revisions.”²

What Jeremiah sees in the Potter’s work is a threat of destruction. There is hope that Israel can start over, but the people must be responsive to God’s shaping of them in order for that to happen. If they persist in resisting God’s hand of re-formation it will not end well for them. The finished product – the ultimate goal of maturity as the people of God – will not be completed. There is hope, but there is a shadow over it in this image of God’s relationship with God’s people.

Remember, God appointed Jeremiah to be a prophet whose word would pluck up and pull down, destroy and overthrow. But it would also build and plant (Jer. 1:10). That’s what God’s Word does. It creates and re-creates; shapes and re-shapes; forms and re-forms God’s people. Constantly. Sometimes, something that is to be re-made has to be destroyed first. We have to start over. And sometimes it can be re-shaped from what is already there. The Spirit of God finds us where we are, takes us as we are, and gets to work on us. It does this through experience, through other people, and through the Word of God – the Bible. God, through the Word, confronts us and challenges us in order to keep us growing and maturing. God works on us to keep the process moving forward.

Turning back to Willimon’s work, he chose an interesting way to show us how the Bible confronts us. “We assemble for church, the choir and clergy are in place, the organ blares forth, and we all sit in orderly rows of pews. This is the congregation at worship. [This was obviously

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/potter-and-the-clay-2/commentary-on-jeremiah-11-10-71-11>. Written by Steed Davidson, Professor of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament; Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the Faculty, McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago, Ill.

written before the pandemic kept us at home!] All might go well were it not for the intrusive prophetic Word:

... *Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:16-17)*

It is this Word, coming upon us, assaulting, reforming us, which makes a congregation *Christian*.”³

How does this happen? Willimon outlines the various ways the Words works on us:

Preaching: “Preaching is at its best when the preacher stands up and tells the truth about what happens when a biblical text intersects our lives and makes a claim upon us.”

Pastoral Care: “The Bible depicts a form of existence, discipleship, which is not primarily about health or wholeness. We are called to faithfulness, which often entails suffering, rejection, and pain. If we can be healthy or whole in the process, so much the better, but whether we feel good about ourselves our not God cares for us by giving us something more interesting to live for than ourselves.”

Christian Education: “The Bible is an ancient, foreign book. It is foreign not only in language, thought patterns, and cultural origins but also in its approach to reality. Contemporary congregations... must go through a cultural shift in order to fully enter the world of the Bible. Therefore the church can expect to expend great time and energy in its dealings with the Bible. We are, in effect, asking people to learn a new language, enter a new culture in order to hear the testimony of scripture.”

Prayer and Worship: In our society, everything is valued on the basis of what it can do for us, how it can help us get what we want. “The Bible asserts that prayer and worship are primarily means of getting what God wants.” Worship, therefore is not about us, it is about God. It is not about making us feel better, but about “being encountered by a holy God.”

Social Action: “Someone must speak to us of a God who unsettles present social arrangements in order to form a new people.” That someone is God’s Word, challenging us to rise above the status quo. “The church’s mandate is to be formed by God into a people who are visibly, distinctively different in their lives together, to be light and salt for a dying world.”⁴

Willimon closes his work with these words: “Our chief means of being truthful is exposure to the Bible. And what invigorating, frightening, revitalizing exposure it can be!”⁵

When God led Jeremiah to observe the work of the potter forming and re-forming the clay, the prophet saw the threat that hung over Israel. He saw the threat of destruction because they were resisting God’s Word, God’s work within them. He also knew what could happen if the people stopped resisting and allowed God to re-form them into the people they were intended to be, the nation of God’s people they were intended to be.

³ Willimon, Pg. 86.

⁴ All references to the ways the Bible reforms the church are from Willimon’s work, Pp. 86-96. Two topics, Ethics and Church Administration are included in Willimon’s work, but for purposes of this sermon were left out of my list.

⁵ Willimon, Pg. 96.

The church, as we heard last week, also must allow God to constantly re-form us, by the Spirit of Christ speaking to us through the Word and through its power. Being on the divine Potter's wheel may be a difficult place to be, but if we submit to the creative power of the Potter, we will be made into something beautiful, something to be used for the furthering of the Gospel.

By the way, in an episode of Forged in Fire, one of the smiths made the comment that he believed his skill was God-given, and that before he even began his work on forming the steel, he asked God to bless the final product, a blade, that it would not be used for destructive harmful purposes. Perhaps we should all pray that God will form and re-form us, not for tearing down, but for building up the body of Christ, the church. Amen.