

REFLECTIONS
September 8, 2019
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Judy York
Jeremiah 18: 1-11

18:1 The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD:

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

18:3 So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel.

18:4 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.

18:5 Then the word of the LORD came to me:

18:6 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.

18:7 At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it,

18:8 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.

18:9 And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it,

18:10 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.

18:11 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.

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Wrath-filled images of God, such as this, can be hard to reconcile. Confusing and unsettling, they stir up my own pain of living under the thumb of a father who could similarly, with the snap a finger, deliver rewards for good behavior or rain destruction when I stepped of out bounds. Or so it seemed to me as a little girl.

My home was not always a safe place and I learned early on not to poke the bear.

Concerned about the closeness I had I with my roommate, when I was nineteen my parents asked if I was a lesbian. I affirmed this, which, of course, poked the bear.

One night, when I was home from college, my dad chased me down the hall in a drunken rage. In response to concerns I'd expressed about his friend drinking and driving as she left the house, he yelled, "Who do you think you are, you dyke?" When he caught up to me in my bedroom, he kicked me. I fell back onto the bed and he came forward, pounding his fists in me. As he continued to beat me, he warned that I would never make it on my own without a husband to support me. He threatened to take away my car (the one I'd paid for with my

summer jobs), pull me out of school (where I was on the honor roll), and send me to conversion therapy.

That night my dad plucked me up, broke me down, and threatened to destroy my life as I knew it for what he saw were sins against God, sins against nature, sins against his family.

Because of passages like this, there are folks in my family still today who will tell you that I deserved that beating. That it's nothing compared to the hell that awaits me in the afterlife because of the choices I've made.

Yet context is everything. For me, and for Israel, this isn't the end of the story.

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My dad, as he did after many rageful outbursts, sobered up the next day and never acted on his threats. We moved along, not speaking of it for years. Pretending it didn't happen.

Yet something in me changed that night. The intensity of fear and rage was like a crucible, forging my path into adulthood.

I went back to school determined I would never ask him for help. At the time I was a writer, a dreamer, a budding activist. All that started to drift away as I began withdrawing from my studies, from my community, and from my faith. It was time for me to "grow up" and I became singularly focused on one thing. Proving him wrong.

Twenty years into that plan, I came to realize this isn't a fight worth winning. I've been crawling my way back to myself ever since.

My dad wasn't an ogre. He was a man who wrestled with his own childhood traumas, addictions that were passed down through the generations, and a level of work-stress from his forty-year military career that's unimaginable to most of us.

It's confusing when the hand that soothes is the hand that harms. When the lap that comforts is the lap that inflicts pain. Sweet memories are mixed with the traumatic. How do you point to the love, when there were unloving things done? In the name of judgement, in the name of control, in the name of molding me, as his offspring.

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Taken out of context, the story of the potter's wheel paints a picture of a judgmental and angry God whose love must be earned.

Yet, we know Jeremiah's writings are woven within a wider tapestry.

Jeremiah lived through one of the darkest times in Jewish history, witnessing the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile and enslavement of the Jewish people. He's been called the suffering prophet, weeping for the sins of his people, for placing their faith in powers other than God.

As he preached his warnings he was scorned, arrested, beaten, and thrown into a pit. At one point crying out to God, "Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable?" (Jeremiah 15: 18)

Yet layered in his writings are God's messages of hope.

- "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls." (Jeremiah 6:16)

- “For I know the plans I have for you... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” (Jeremiah 29:11)
- "The days are coming ... when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah." (Jeremiah 31:31)

This is the hope we have come to know. The hope that calls to us in our darkest nights. The hope that the Way of Jesus is built on. It's the hope held in the Mystery of the Cross, as Richard Rohr describes, that suffering can be transformed through “movement from a self-created order, to a risky allowing of necessary disorder, to the “third force” reordering that we call the resurrected life.”

The story of the potter's wheel offers a metaphorical gift of hope, healing, and reordering for a traumatized nation, a traumatized people.

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James Finley, a former monk and spiritual director of Thomas Merton, is a clinical psychologist and contemplative who teaches alongside Rohr. He defines trauma as being powerless to establish a boundary between oneself and that which has, or is about to, inflict serious harm.

This powerlessness of trauma becomes manifested in our hearts as we internalize the message dealt with each blow of the perpetrator – “I'm out here on my own. No one is looking out for me. No one can save me.” In these flailing states of fear ... in the cry, “Why is my pain unending?” ... an illusion of separateness is born. In this armoring of self-sufficiency, we come to believe that we are the only ones who can set us free. Our ego fires up with charges like, “I'm going to show him,” as it attempts to power over and power through the pain.

Our heart hardens like a forgotten lump of clay and we forget to Whom we really belong. To the truth that was written on our souls as we were knit in our mother's womb. The root of suffering, as Finley explains, is estrangement from spiritual experience, from connected awareness, from our inherent oneness with God.

In families that perpetuate secrecy of trauma, we learn that by armoring our heart and burying our head we mute the pain. By driving it far enough into the shadows, where no one can see it, we can still highly function, even with a smile on our face.

I will go do good in the world, find troubles greater than mine to fix, and somehow it will fill this aching hole in my chest. I walked this path for years until it brought me to my knees.

It's a half-life, a half-truth, and violent towards ourselves and the world we live in. As long as our hands and hearts are tightly clenched around our own secret fears and traumas, we're not able to fully receive the Love that is loving us. And, in turn, our ability to compassionately embrace the world, as it really needs us to, is muted.

Until I can honor my own wounds, I can't really attune to my neighbors'. And until I can attune to my neighbors', I can't begin to honor those at our borders or halfway around the world.

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Love does not judge or compare the proximity or severity of the wound.
 Love knows that any pain, all pain, not transformed is transmitted.
 When the gut-wrenching oozing sore is laid at the altar, Love doesn't look away.
 Love tenderly scoops up, holds, softens, and reforms the wound.
 Love invites possibilities, newness, and redemption.

Love longs, alongside of us, for our healing and our wholeness.
Love knows that the light gets to us through these broken places.
And Love knows that it's through walking our own cycles of woundedness and healing we are
better able to meet the pain of the world.
Love invites it all to the table.

* * *

Two years ago, my dad passed away. In his passing more truth was revealed about his deeper struggles with addictions, his pain and hidden darkness. I came to the stark realization that what he raged against in me that night was a reflection, mirroring lifelong secrets that were haunting him from within.

These revelations spun me sharply into old, familiar illusions of separateness and I began to lose my spiritual footing. Trying to make sense of these life-long patterns of upheaval, I met with Bill Sitterley. Years ago, Bill happened to be a participant in some of Finley's early meditation circles as he was beginning to tease out the role of spirituality in the transformation of trauma. Expressing how lost I was – I resolved that all I knew to do is to keep walking through the fire, willing one foot in front of the other until I made it to the other side. A terrifying and lonely proposition, this is how I'd learned to survive the chaos of my childhood.

Bill, sitting with me in my pain, said, "It is much like anytime you step into the river, there is a calling for surrender and trust." Interrupting him, I explained it's different this time. I can't tell even what the water is or even if I am in water. Bill replied, in a half whisper and bringing me to tears – "The river always knows what the river is."

And the river is always inviting us in, which means that it's not about what steps I can take or can't take in a given day to right the ship. It's more about allowing the necessary disorder of my life to be ... and building the capacity to surrender into the Loving Embrace that is always calling for me. Finley explains, "God protects us in nothing yet unexplainably sustains us in all things."

In one of my last conversations with my dad he lamented that with seven billion people in the world, God was too busy for the likes of him. This is the scar of trauma speaking. I challenged his small vision of God. The Potter knows that all is reworkable, nothing gets scraped, no one is lost. The Potter scoops up all that seems disformed, disfigured, and sometimes disgusting, softens up the fibers, coaxes out the bubbles, rubs away the impurities, and resurrects new life.

Our work is to invite the potter in. To allow our self to be softened, hollowed out, and opened spaciouly to the possibility of something bigger and beyond us. To surrender into the Mystery of the Cross which, paradoxically, can be one of the hardest things to do.

Like my father, I bear generational scars of trauma and addiction. When triggers abound, I reach for my self-protective cocoons. Vacillating between fear and courage, I fall into starvation and binge cycles in my meditation and prayer practice.

Like Jeremiah and his people, I actively struggle with placing my faith in powers other than God.

Yet there are days when the light does break through.

When I'm graced with the awareness that I am not out here on my own, that I am supported by wise and precious guides, that God is with me.

I stumble into awe for this life with Sheila that's been gifted to me – the innocent light in our children's eyes, the beauty of the blooming daffodils we planted last fall, the stillness of the morning air after a hard summer's rain.

"Only when we rest in God can we find the safety, the spaciousness, and the scary freedom to be who we are, all that we are, more than we are, and less than we are." That's a quote from Richard Rohr's, Everything Belongs.

Amen.

Jack Young
Luke 14:25-33

ALL IN

"Jesus loves me! This I know, For the Bible tells me so!" (No – I am not auditioning for the choir!) Seriously – Do you remember learning those words in your youth? Rather reassuring – Right? "Jesus Loves Me!"

Oh- But listen to what our Gospel lesson for this morning has to say!

1. Jesus made it clear that to be with him as a disciple - a follower - you have to be *all in* - no half-hearted effort! He simply cannot be *less loved* - even by immediate family members. No *second thoughts*... **ALL IN**.

2. And there will be *work involved* - *take up the cross* and follow him.

3. Likewise - it can't be a half-baked, poorly thought out effort - estimating and planning and resourcing will be mandatory considerations - lest the task be incomplete. No guesswork permitted! Finish the task!

4. And lastly - what if your assessment - your preliminary estimate - portends an impossible outcome - don't be hesitant to discuss the issue *ahead of time* with those involved! And also be will to re-assess and take another go at it! Be willing to realistically assess the situation – will success be the likely outcome?

Reflecting on the above four (4) criteria – it occurred to me that – SPC's transition team leaders, the PNC and the Session have been addressing the *transition evolution* with the *Luke verses* in mind. Next Sunday at the special Congregational meeting, we will hear the results of their considerable efforts!

Now I have to admit that the wording of verse 26 really got my attention – and in particular the word *hate*! ... *Whoever comes to me and does not "hate" father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself cannot be my disciple.*

For me – the word *hate* was a **real grabber**!

I must admit – It gave me reason to pause and scratch my head a bit! How could that be? But, there it was in black and white!

So I decided to try to gain a better understanding about what message was being conveyed in that verse?

One explanation I found, shed a different light on the question... specifically, the Greek word for hate is *Miseo*. In that context, you can think of **Hate** meaning *less loved*.

I believe that most Christians would feel obligated to soften the face meaning of the word *hate* – to something like *love less than me*.

It follows then that – no person, and no person's personal priorities should be placed above the priority of the person of Christ and His priorities. Hence it is used in a **relative sense...**
Meaning less loved.

For me, this reads much better.

This is further confirmed because other Scripture, including Christ's own statements, make it clear that one is not absolutely to have an *adversarial emotion* toward any of these people. i.e. *Parents are to be honored and oneself is to be loved.*

As I considered the meaning of the *wording* in these Mark passages - it became abundantly clear to me that one of the important and overarching meanings has to do with *The Cost of Discipleship!* ... there is no **FREE** Lunch! The famous German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, provides an enduring source of wisdom on the demands of Christian discipleship. For example, he states, *Discipleship is not an offer that man makes to Christ!*

Verse 14:27 tells us that there is also *labor/work* involved... Jesus tells all that they must *take up* (i.e. carry) *the cross* to be a disciple. Discipleship requires – each of us – to carry our share of the load!

As I wrestled with the specific wording in the Luke 14 verses – I decided to step back from the specific wording and think about the *overall context* of the issue... as it applies to *me* – to each of us here in the SPC family of worshipers... And more specifically, can I – can we – relate and apply the *discipleship message* to our congregational task before us? *Successfully completing our Transition Tasks?*

14:25 Now large crowd were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them,

14:26 "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.

14:27 Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

14:28 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.

14:29 Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him,

14:30 Saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish."

14:31 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 hi with twenty thousand?

14:32 If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace.

14:33 So therefore **none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.**

THEN – IT WILL BE TIME FOR EACH OF US TO STEP FORWARD – to do our *Disciple part* as *SPC transition evolution comes to fruition.*

It will be the time for each of us to be **ALL IN** for assisting in accomplishing the successful SPC TRANSITION.

Thus ensuring our new minister will have the wherewithal to move SPC and our church family successfully into the future.

Hopefully, You are (or will be) asking yourself *What personal commitment can I make and how can I personally contribute?*

You might think of it in these terms – to be **ALL IN** really amounts to being

IN – VOLVED

Being a Disciple – a follower – is not a Spectator Sport!

I'M READY TO BE ALL IN – HOW ABOUT YOU?