

*Based on Jeremiah 18:1-6. The Prophet Meets the Potter*

*Thou art the potter, goes the old familiar hymn. I am the clay.*

Which can be comforting, if we think about it. Imagining the patient, tender, competent hand of God molding us and shaping us into a beautiful creation. Witness the communion ware and baptismal font sculpted by our own Del Martin. This is who *we* are, the prophet says, sculpted by the hand of God.

Any potter worth their salt, however, will tell you it is a bit more complicated than that. Which is why I leapt at the opportunity to lead a youth retreat in the studio of a potter several years ago. We were excited to delve deeper into this powerful symbolism of God and humanity in relationship with one another.

But as the first member of our group of amateurs sat delicately at the potter's wheel, I started to get a little nervous. We began joking that she was like an all-powerful God shaping an all-too human lump of clay beneath her eager hands. The clay swirling in circles on the wheel as the rest of us watched in wonder. All of us, including her, oblivious to its ultimate fate. What would become of that clay, we wondered? How would she choose to shape it? How would the clay respond?

It was intended to be a moment of playful exploration—and it was—but the power of the spiritual symbolism loomed large over our gathered community. We laughed at the analogy of our dear friend taking on the role of God with this clay—a role that each one of us would play before the end of the morning—and we were excited about the possibilities of what we could create with this substance of the earth using our bare hands and a little imagination. To be honest, we were excited about the thrill of playing God, even though we knew it was just a joke. That it was all in good fun. That it wasn't really real.

(Or was it?)

In the midst of our playful joking we also marveled at the awesome responsibility placed upon us as brand new potters to make something beautiful of this mysterious substance. Beneath our laughter lay the secret fear—at least for me—that our inexperienced hands might do something dreadfully wrong. That this might mean something dreadfully terrible about who God is in relationship to us as God's people. That it might confirm our worst fears about a God of judgment and vengeance and rejection, rather than the God of grace and love and acceptance we want to proclaim.

So when that first lump of clay went flying off the wheel in one final stroke of irredeemable disaster, I gulped. “So, Pastor Gusti, what does this say about God!?” one of the youth demanded.

Um. Does some *other* pastor out there want to answer that question?

All was not lost, and we started again, knowing that any one of us who had been the first to try the potter's wheel would have had the same experience. One by one, we each took turns at the wheel, exploring the joys and

frustrations of working clay into something special. And we did, indeed, end up with some very special creations—a beautiful bowl and a decorated tile and a celebrated birthday present. And my personal favorite: a custom-designed tray made by one of the youth to hold his newly acquired i-pod.

But the question lingers ...

Has God created us to be useful, treasured, feeding a hungry world with the bread of life and the cup of saving love? Or do we fly off the wheel in one final blow of judgment, crushed, broken, rejected, abandoned, like that very first piece of clay in the hands of that very first potter at the beginning of our youth retreat?

We have asked this question, we have prayed this question, we have cried out at the seeming injustice of this question as a people of faith from generation to generation throughout our biblical tradition. From the Garden of Eden where God formed the clay of individual human creatures and pronounced us good! Then banished us from the garden when we tried to play God and failed miserably. Through slavery in Egypt where God formed the clay of an oppressed community into a liberated covenant people to bless all communities of the earth! Then failing to live with justice in the land and banished to bitter exile.

What will become of us, we have asked throughout the millennia—in *this* life, not just the life to come—whether we seem to have it all or whether we seem to have lost everything? When we are spinning together in that potter's wheel, uncertain of our common fate because too much is beyond our control, even if we love to pretend otherwise, because the hand of God that is molding us does not always feel as steady as we think it should? Is God molding us into something beautiful and productive? Or is God rejecting us as a disappointing mass of useless clay that can no longer live up to the expectations of our maker?

Might God even be doing a little bit of both?

I do not actually know what happened to that first lump of clay that fell off the potter's wheel in our youth retreat. If it got thrown away or just set aside. What I do know is this: somewhere, somehow, that lump of clay will return to the earth. Someday a new potter will pick it back up and turn it into something beautiful.

Somehow, some way, the lump of clay rejected by us will always be the one who is chosen by God. *This* is the Word of Hope for us today!