



## **Being Remolded**

### **Jeremiah 18:1-11**

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When I graduated college, I took a job as the campus ministry associate for my alma mater. I moved from the student apartments up on the hill into a staff apartment near the front of campus. One of the apartments next door to my new place had been converted into an art studio, which housed a pottery wheel and kiln.

I had a good friend who was studying art at the college, who at some point gave me a tour of the studio. Expressing my curiosity, I asked if she could show me how the pottery wheel worked. Not intending to make any specific piece of art at the time, she cut a piece of clay off a larger block, prepped the wheel, and showed me the process of pottery making. She explained and showed me how the clay had to be centered on the wheel, and then demonstrated a variety of techniques that helped draw up the sides of the pot, how to create the desired thickness of the edges, and how to press and mend those edges to create a desired shape.

As she explained and demonstrated the different techniques, she also showed how easy it was to take a relatively well formed bowl back into a lump of clay. Simply with the folding of her hands, any prior work was erased. After some time of shaping, molding, and creating, in the blink of an eye, there on the spinning wheel sat a unformed clump of clay, just like she had cut from the block at the start. She would then have to recenter the clay on the wheel before she could start molding and shaping a new vessel.

I have often thought of her demonstration when reading this text in Jeremiah. I've thought about how much time goes into shaping a worthwhile creation, and how quickly such hard work can be wiped away.

As our scriptural text begins this morning, Jeremiah is instructed to go to the potter's house and to await a word from the Lord. As Jeremiah arrived, he found the potter working at the wheel. I imagine his experience was similar to mine as he sat and watched. He was intrigued and amazed. He was enlightened to the craft of throwing pottery. He was intent on learning and studying this delicate art, which requires great force while also necessitating a gentle touch. He witnessed as the vessel of clay became spoiled, ground back into a lump, and again reworked into a new vessel.

The text offers this space for Jeremiah to witness and learn before hearing from the Lord. He is given time to observe the potter-at-work.

Then a word from the Lord came to him. The Lord spoke to Jeremiah, saying, "Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? ... Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel."

There's something beautiful about imagining the divine creator being intimately involved with our formation. It harkens back to the creation story, when God created humanity from the earth. Indeed, the name Adam, which we find in the creation story, comes from the Hebrew word *ha-adam*, which more literally means *human from the soil*, or *mud-human*. It is God, forming humanity from the dirt of the earth – just as a potter creates vessels from clay.

I think it is important to note here, as I so often highlight in the text, that the Lord is not speaking to Jeremiah about any individual's personal formation. The text is not referencing, as it is often utilized, our individual formation. The text offers that the Lord forms the community, here named "the house of Israel." The text is speaking of our collective formation – how God shapes us as a people.

In verses 7-11, the text then elaborates on this opening statement that has been made, which identifies the potter and the formation of the clay as a metaphor for God and the formation of God's people.

The text indicates that, like the potter who collapses the clay back into a heaping pile, God too can break down and destroy a nation that might warrant such a renewal. It also indicates that, should the formation be corrected – should a nation find itself becoming more like God desires – that God's mind can be changed regarding the need to start again.

In the same way, should God be pleased with a nation or kingdom, but such entity begins to do evil by not listening to the voice of God, that God's mind might be changed such that the nation *warrants* a new beginning.

Lest there be any confusion as to what God is saying, let us clarify the prophetic word.

This text doesn't mince words. As the great Hebrew Scholar, Bruce Birch, offers, "Jeremiah's lesson from God begins with the negative side of the metaphor. God, as divine potter, can shape, destroy, and shape again."<sup>i</sup> This is, as we might read later in the Biblical witness, what ultimately becomes of the people of Israel. Failing to heed the prophetic warning, Jerusalem and Judah will be overthrown by the Babylonians, and God's covenanted people will be sent into exile where they will be reshaped as a people.

And yet, while the text makes clear that destruction is possible, (that is, it's within God's capacity,) it also indicates that God's plan of action can be changed. Again, the prophetic text doesn't mince words – God's mind can be changed. As Professor Melissa Ramos notes, "the force of the verb is clear in its meaning that [the Lord] would change the course of action in response to a change of behavior from the people."<sup>ii</sup>

It's a shame that this text – along with many other judgement texts in the Hebrew Scripture – is so often used to strike fear among those who seek to learn from the prophetic witness. These judgement texts are often offered as a call to "beware," as if God is a divine boogeyman out to get us for our failure to follow the divine will. It's obvious this text, among many, can be used to highlight God's willingness to fold in the lump of clay. We saw a similar passage a few weeks ago in Isaiah, as God allowed for the destruction of the vineyard – another metaphor for the people of Israel.

But, and this is an important but, even should a grand re-start be necessitated, God's action doesn't end with the folding in of the clay. God's divine action doesn't end with judgement; it involves a cycle of rebirth, an intentional renewal: a process of reshaping and remolding.

"The purpose of the prophetic pronouncement is to bring about change, to restore justice, so that a bright future might arrive rather than the dark one that is looming on the horizon."<sup>iii</sup>

Let me offer a glimpse of how this process of folding in and recreating works. I want to expand a bit on the story that was shared in last week's email from the events of our community in 1899.

There is an organization in Montgomery, Alabama called the Equal Justice Initiative (known in short as EJI). In 2010, the EJI began investigating thousands of racial terror lynchings that had taken place in our nation's history throughout the southeast. To date, they have documented over 4000 such events that took place in our nation between 1877 and 1950. In 2018, they opened the National Museum for Peace and Justice, which has over 800 steel monuments – one for each county in which a lynching took place. One of those pillars is inscribed with the words: "Alexandria, Virginia." On it are the names of the two men who were killed in our community: Joseph McCoy in 1897, and Benjamin Thomas in 1899.

The EJI has offered to every county the ability to have their pillar moved to the local community as a permanent monument.

In an effort to have our city's pillar relocated, over the past couple years, we have had a local group called the Alexandria Community Remembrance Project leading our efforts to offer education, dialogue, and public acknowledgement in hopes of reshaping our cultural landscape in a way that more truthfully and accurately reflects our history.

A couple weeks ago, I was invited by this group to join a planning conversation for the upcoming soil consecration ceremony, which is to be held on Saturday, September 24. Soil from the locations where both Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas were killed will be consecrated before it is sent down to the National Museum for Peace and Justice.

As a part of that planning conversation, we were asked to do the normal introductory comments. *Who are you? What church do you represent? And, what brings you to this work?*

Some of those present shared how their congregations were directly involved in these events in the 1890s – for example, it was the pastor at Roberts Memorial Methodist who eulogized Joseph McCoy in 1897. When it was my turn, I shared my name, my congregation, and acknowledged – because I know the history our congregation – that I came to the conversation not having a direct connection to these events, but knowing that in the 1800s, our congregation supported slavery and stood on the wrong side of racial animosity. And that today, I represent a congregation who is seeking to offer support in whatever ways we can as a statement against racial inequity.

As I finished speaking, one of the Community Remembrance Project leaders spoke up. She said, "Rev. James, you actually do have a connection to these events." I held my breathe ... she continued, "Mayor George Simpson, who was the mayor in 1899 when Benjamin Thomas was lynched, was a member of your church."

This was news to me – I don't know that I've ever heard the name George Simpson before. I emailed Ann Cary, our office manager, to see what she could find as to his involvement in the church. And I googled his name, to see just how involved he was in Benjamin Thomas' murder.

The historical records are not kind to George Simpson. He was quite involved with the events that led to Thomas' lynching, most notably offering, in an attempt to quiet the mob – that they needed to disperse and to let the legal proceedings take place following Thomas' arrest. But, he continued, that if Thomas was not found guilty, he – the mayor himself – would lead the mob to lynch him.

Later in the day, I received a response from Ann Cary who had sufficiently combed through our records, offering that Simpson had both his children baptized in this church in the 1880s, and that he and his wife joined the church in 1901. According to our records, two years after he publicly stated that he would lead the crowd in lynching a man found not guilty by our legal system, the church welcomed him into membership.

Now, I'd like to think that in those two years, Simpson himself was folded in and reshaped according to divine justice. His joining the church could have been a grand statement of repentance. It's hard to know - but I've read enough of our church's history, and have heard enough stories of our past, to doubt such a change had taken place.

Yet, in that same historical recollection, tracing the arc of our congregational past, I would not say that we have been exempt from the weight of the potter's hand. We are not, as a corporate body, the same as we were 120 years ago. We do not reflect the same social errors, nor bear the same unjust sentiments of racial animosity. There has been in our past a flattening of the clay, and we are, even still today, like a potter with her clay, being formed and reformed to better reflect the will of God in the world.

The potter does not simply throw the clay off the wheel, the potter begins anew.

While it is important to name our past and to acknowledge from whence we have come, I think the historical arc offers us a greater reflection. Looking more broadly at our congregational history, we can claim the good news of the prophetic promise – God has not abandoned us. We have not been thrown off the wheel. The divine artist has been true to the covenant of promise. Having gifted us with the witness of love in Christ, having empowered us with the presence of the Spirit, we can claim in truth the prophet's proclamation: we are being remolded – reformed – reshaped – recreated – and reconciled into a vessel that proclaims love and justice, righteousness and faithfulness. With the pressure of the potter's hands on our sides, we are being made into a place for everyone to know God's love.

So let us give thanks that the God of endings and new beginnings is working in our midst. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Bruce C. Birch. *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

<sup>ii</sup> Melissa Ramos. "Commentary on Jeremiah 18:1-11." *Workingpreacher.org*. Retrieved August 31, 2022.

<sup>iii</sup> Ramos.