

Clay

Jeremiah 18:1-11

September 4, 2016

Imagine a young woman there on the floor at the front of the church. She is sitting on a short stool behind a small table. On the table is set a broad wheel that she spins by means of a foot pedal. She places a mound of wet grey clay onto the middle of the wheel and she begins working the clay with her hands: stretching, shaping, smoothing, sculpting.

She works with skill and imagination, with a clear vision for what she wants and a great love for what she does. She is an artist. And this is her art!



The young woman is Brenna Waack, daughter to Dale and Evie Waack, now Brenna Thompson, married to Ryan, and working as a nutritionist in St. Paul, Minnesota. She is the artist and this is her art. She threw this pot during Sunday morning worship thirteen years ago, working as you watched and as I preached, the last time this text from Jeremiah was used as the focus for worship. After worship, she took the pot home, glazed it and fired it, and brought it back to us as a gift. Brenna is the artist and this is what she made of the clay.

God is the artist and we are the clay! God works with us: stretching, shaping, smoothing, sculpting. God works with skill and imagination, with a clear vision for what he wants and a great love for what he does. God is the artist, and we ...

We are a work in progress! Whenever a piece of pottery turns out imperfect, the potter takes the clay and breaks it down and keeps on working with it, making it into something else, something new. In this case, in our case, it's no reflection on the skill of the artist, but on the nature of the material with which he is working!

We are the clay. We are the clay, but this clay, by nature, by God's design, has a say in what is made of it. We can resist the hands of the potter, we can fail, by our own intention, to hold the shape into which we have been fashioned. But God is going to keep on stretching us, keep on shaping us, keep on smoothing us, keep on sculpting us until we have attained the full beauty, the full beauty, of what God has in mind for us.

So, brace yourself. God is going to make us into something else, into something new. That's scary. We are going to be changed! And it is hopeful. We can be changed!

But we have a say. We have a part. We have to change: change our ways, change the things we are doing. We have to stop living sinful lives.

Stop living sinful lives. Is there any place else to talk about sin? Any place better to talk about sin than here, here in the presence of the artist who is deeply invested in his art, deeply interested in what becomes of you? This is the place to be honest, to tell and know the truth, to see clearly and to confess.

To confess, not our failings, but our sins. It is not that we have not somehow been strong enough or wise enough or good enough, but that we have been diverted, distracted, that we have resisted, rebelled, run away, that we have consciously or unconsciously, out of fear or pride, resisted the hands of the potter upon us. And that is sin.

What is sin? The church has not often done a very good job of identifying and dealing with sin. It seems half the church doesn't want to talk about it and the other half can't stop talking about ... other people's sins! The church has, at times, shined the spotlight on various vices -- drinking or smoking or gambling, or on various sexual peccadilloes, on contraception and abortion, or on the debauchery of the entertainment industry, or, worst of all, on anything that is different from it, anything that challenges its own comfortable self-satisfaction.

But sin is much more subtle, much more sinister, much more pervasive, in and among all of us. Petty jealousies. Needing to have our own way, even at cost, great cost, to us and to others. Bitterness and grudges and nursed hurts. Prejudices and favoritism and currying favor. Fear and inaction and self-loathing. Hoarding, protecting, and defending what is God's to provide and God's to protect. Complacency. Apathy. Love that is too small, too narrow, too self-serving.

Lord, have mercy!

You are our father, Lord. We are like clay, and you are like the potter. You created us, so do not be too angry with us or hold our sins against us forever. We are your people; be merciful to us.