

**A Potter's World**  
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church  
July 21, 2024 AM Sermon  
Dr. Duane Kelderman  
Jeremiah 18:1-12

We live in a potter's world. I don't know much about pottery, but I did bring with me this evening something that a potter made. A friend of ours named Carol made this bowl for us. I'm not sure how Carol made this set for our family, but in Jeremiah's day, these pieces would have been made on a potter's wheel. The potter's wheel that Jeremiah describes was actually two wheels. There was a big wheel real close to the ground, on a shaft that was stuck into the ground. The potter would sit down and spin that wheel around with her feet. On the top of that shaft that was another much smaller wheel. This bowl would have started out as a lump of clay on that top wheel.

Now, Jeremiah wonders (in v. 4), what happens if the bowl gets spoiled? Maybe the potter added too much water to the clay and it was too soupy; maybe some little pebbles didn't get filtered out of the clay; maybe the clay wasn't centered on the wheel. Any number of things could cause the potter to take something she was working on off of the wheel, squeeze it all together, throw it back on the wheel, and start all over again.

And no one questions the right and freedom of the potter to do that, to make of the clay whatever she wants. She reworks it into another vessel (4) "as it seems good to the potter to do." It is absurd to think of a potter asking the clay, "Now clay, what do you think? Do you think I should do this with you or that?" The potter is the potter. The clay is the clay.

The point of Jeremiah is: Just like the potter controls the clay, and not the other way around, so God is sovereign over all of history, all of life, all the affairs of mankind. All things are under God's rule. He is God. Vs. 7-10 show that God is also responsive to history and prayer. He is a dynamic participant in the unfolding story of our lives and of history. But God is absolutely sovereign.

The people in Jeremiah's day had lost sight of that basic truth. God kept saying through Jeremiah, "Repent, turn from your idolatry, your hedonism, your cruelty to the weak and helpless. Turn back to the God of your fathers and mothers."

God's people had heard that message, they understood it, but they said, "Naah. Thanks, but no thanks." (12) "We will follow our own plans."

In the metaphor of the potter and the clay today, God is anticipating the protest of the people as things now go against them because of their brazen disobedience.

The people will say, God, you can't let all these bad things happen to us. You can't let the enemy overrun our nation. You can't let this famine go on. And God's response is, the clay doesn't tell the potter what he can and cannot do. "I am God. I am God." I have the power and the right to do what I want.

**QUESTION:** Is this good news or bad news? Preaching is supposed to be the declaration of good news. Is the point of this metaphor—that God is sovereign and has the power and right to do what he wants—is that good news or bad news?

Well, it depends. If this sovereign God also happens to be mean, unjust, sadistic, and whimsical, then this is bad news. If the point of the metaphor is simply to show off an angry God's muscles and say, "See that, I'm bigger than you and I can do whatever I please," then God is someone to be afraid of, and this world is a scary place.

But the metaphor of the potter and the clay—the news that God is absolutely sovereign—is good news, precisely because the whole point of the metaphor is that God is a potter. We live in a potter’s world. God is making something new, something beautiful. Yes, God can do whatever he wants. **But what does he want?**

This Hebrew word translated “potter” is an interesting word. As a verb, it means to shape, to form. Throughout the O.T., the word describes God’s creative activity: God forms Adam out of the dust of the ground. (The potter is already at work.) His hands form the dry land. He shapes the mountains. His fingers curve the energy of light. He knits Job together, and formed Jeremiah in his mother’s womb. He patiently constructs the locust, and builds, with all of its intricacies, the human eye.

The Bible uses this Hebrew word for “potter” to describe all of those creative activities of God. We live in a potter’s world, a world where God is not Rambo, but is an artist, who first had a dream of what it would be like to create a universe that would be ruled by persons whom he would make in his image. So the potter went to work. And when he finished his work, he couldn’t believe it, it was so breathtaking.

When that universe plunged itself into sin and the work of art suffered great harm, the potter had another dream, to restore that universe to its original, pristine beauty; no, to do more than that, to make it even more glorious than the first time, and to transform his image-bearers into the likeness of his own Son, Jesus Christ—God himself, who would come to live among us, who would himself be all that toward which life was moving.

Everything in the universe serves that purpose, that dream, that design. Indeed, “in Christ all things hold together.” Even when it looks like life is meaningless and chaotic, the potter is at the wheel, making something new, something beautiful.

Now, one of the sobering facts about living in a potter’s world is that God will rework anything when it is not fitting into his broad design. He will throw it to the wheel. Often that hurts. Now, it’s important to realize: Not everything that hurts in life is God throwing the clay to the wheel. But when God throws the clay to the wheel, it often hurts. Jeremiah shows later that there are even times when the vessel gets so far from God’s design, and so hardened in its distortions, that God has to shatter it and start all over. In ch.19, Jeremiah takes a clay pot and throws it onto the ground (breaking it into a thousand pieces). He says, “This is what God is going to do to you, Israel.” He does this to persons, to nations, to churches, to cultures.

God as the potter and this world as a potter’s world is good news not because it guarantees a life without pain. It is good news because God guarantees that every part of life, every moment of history, every cell, every atom, every star, every tear is under the sovereignty, the control of a potter who has committed himself to create something new, something beautiful. G. W. Chesterton says, the sun doesn’t rise by natural law; it rises because God says, “Get up and do it again.” Everything, everything lives and moves and has its being under God. He is the potter. We live in a potter’s world.

Do you believe this? Do you believe that God is absolutely sovereign, and that when it comes to our lives and to all of history, that he is the potter and we are the clay?

What would be the fruit in our lives if we believed this more deeply?

For starters, I think we might trust in God a little more and in ourselves a little less, which might lead to more peace in our lives, perhaps even the peace that passes all understanding. I don’t know about you but I find it hard to really trust in God. I like to trust in my money, in my way of life, my status; I like to trust in America; I like being number one in the world. The greatest evidence that I trust in these things too much is my anxiety, my fear of losing these things. That’s the evidence that I have misplaced my trust. The

Heidelberg Catechism calls that misplacing of trust idolatry. These things I mentioned quickly become idols; namely, things in which I put my trust. The first fruit of believing that God is sovereign, God is the potter, should be greater trust in him and greater peace about life.

It's not unusual for someone to come up to me these days and say, "So Duane, are you really retired now, or are you still doing things?" I explain that I'm still doing a lot of things, but then I quickly go on to explain that, yes I'm very busy, but I feel like I don't have any weight on my shoulders. I don't have any budgets to worry about. I don't have any personnel things to deal with. All the stuff that goes with institutional leadership. I love my life, I say.

A while back, though, I caught myself adding one more thing. I said, "You know, as I look back, though, I realize something about most of the stuff that was on my shoulders when I did have all those responsibilities: I put those things there.

God did not ask me to worry about 90% things that I worried about. I often lived and worked and worried as if I were the one in charge, not God.

I think if we really trusted in God, and not all these idols, including ourselves, we'd have more peace, more freedom, more joy, more wonder, more laughter.

Another fruit of believing God is sovereign, God is the potter and I am the clay, should be greater humility which also leads to greater peace in life.

I love the line from the hymn, God is his own interpreter and he will make it plain. Indeed, as that hymn says, God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform. And we don't see things clearly; we see through a glass dimly.

Especially in a polarized world, I think we are often too sure of ourselves.

I think we all need the humility that comes from hearing God say, as he does in Psalm 46, "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations; I will be exalted in the earth."

And again, as with greater trust, this greater humility leads to peace. Isn't it great that we don't have to have everything figured out God is God. We are not. And that's good.

A third fruit of believing that God is the potter and that I am the clay is a greater submission to God, a greater obedience, a greater relinquishing of those things we hang onto so tightly. actually let go of those idols in which we have put our trust.

In Jeremiah 18, the children of Israel were going in totally the wrong direction in their lives; they were trusting in everything but God; they needed a 180 degree turn in their lives. And they simply were not interested in that. No thanks, God, they said. And that's the showdown of Jeremiah 18. God was predicting, It's not going to be pretty.

Now I said earlier, not everything that is painful in our lives is the potter throwing the clay against the wheel, but when God, the potter, does throw the clay against the wheel, it could very well be, as we say today, disruptive. It may tear away our idols, it may humble us, it may throw our lives upside down. That's what the potter does. That's what the gospel does.

But God hastens to add, I am the potter. I am making something beautiful. Including you. I am the potter. I have never made a promise that I have not kept.

And I promise that when the vessel is finished, when that final tapestry is unfolded,  
when the gates of that new city are opened wide . . .  
I promise that all of the pain of being reshaped by the potter will seem like  
a moment, a split second, they will so outweighed by the eternal glory and beauty that awaits us.

But God, if you . . .

I am the potter. Believe. Trust me. Follow me. We live in a potter's world.

Prayer:

Our prayer is the doxology of Paul: Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and  
knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the  
kind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God that God should repay him? For  
from him and through him and to him are all things. To God be the glory forever! Amen.

© Dr. Duane Kelderman