

In the Hands of the Potter

Jeremiah 18:1-11; Luke 14:25-33

Today I want to share a story of another Presbyterian Church and another pastor, the Reverend Steve Yamaguchi, the Executive Presbyter for Los Ranchos Presbytery in California:

The first church I served after seminary was in a horrible situation. What had been a flourishing church in 1965 had declined to a handful of faithful old stalwarts who kept things going, but the church had ceased to grow. Does this sound familiar? Do you see churches near you that are in similar decline?

In 1988, I was graduating from seminary and listening for God's call to a particular pastorate. Opportunities abounded from coast-to-coast and overseas. Wonderful churches were interesting and interested, and I interviewed with various churches along with numerous other candidates. But, then, there was Grace: this funky little church in southern California. It was a dying church. But the people were faithful. And the call was from God. So off we went my wife and me, driving across country to an exciting and scary new adventure.

When I arrived in my office in August of '88, I was greeted by a brown, dead lawn. The flowerbeds had only tall, dried weeds. My office book case was full of silverfish and spiders. There were two Sunday School rooms in the whole church property, each room about eight feet square. Stuck to the wall at eye level in one room were the dried remains of fruit that had splattered there. The pews and carpet in the sanctuary had chewing gum stuck on them. The pew Bibles and the hymnals had gum stuck in them, covers torn off, pages ripped out, scribbling in the Bibles. Renters – who the church hoped would be a source of income – had sorely abused the facility. The church sat in the midst of gang activity; Crips and Bloods were still actively feuding in those days. The church sat on Compton Boulevard on the east border of Compton, that city in LA infamous as the home of gangster rap.

Now, some of you may know that in the Presbyterian Church we do not have an office of the bishop, and churches and pastors may seek out each other. The presbytery must bless the pastoral relationship, but the presbytery does not place ministers in churches.

Well, shortly after arriving at this wonderful little church, I was describing this seamy situation to a friend who was a lifelong Methodist. She responded in shock, shaking her head and saying, "Oh, you must have done something really bad to the bishop for him to stick you there."

Well, I didn't get stuck there by the bishop. And yet, it would be wrong to say that I "chose" this church. It was still God's call. God called through the voice of that church, and God spoke to me through the people's faithfulness. The interview process, which in the Presbyterian Church is sort of like a courtship dance, was really much more my interviewing them than they me. A few of them were ready to call almost anybody who didn't mumble too much. I, however, had some serious questions. How had the church gotten this way? What had gone wrong? But my biggest question for them, and I did examine them on this issue, was whether or not they were ready to change the way they were doing things.

Our Jeremiah passage is about getting another chance to change, to get it right. It's about the potter

who realizes that the work in his hands has gone wrong, but, rather than throw out the clay, he gives it a new start and makes something useful and beautiful out of the redeemed lump.

"Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done?" says the Lord.

Jeremiah, chapter 18, really only makes sense in the whole context of chapters 17 through 19. Chapter 18, our passage today, is about God saying, "I will change my mind" about the disaster that is coming. But in chapter 17 we hear God warn the people about their sin of not honoring the Sabbath. And in chapter 19, the people are warned about going too far in their stand.

In our little church some have wondered, "What was wrong with the church?" Some blamed the neighborhood. Some blamed demographics of the congregation. Some blamed the denomination. Some blamed this person or that member.

I think that our problem was like the problem in Jeremiah 17--a failure to honor the Sabbath. Some would say, "How can that be? The only thing that we did was to have church on the Sabbath." But even when the people came together for church and survival, they did not do it in a God-honoring spirit of Sabbath.

There was not on Sundays a quiet, trusting, returning, resting Spirit about coming together as God's people. Church was about keeping the rituals going--at least as many rituals as physically possible given the declining size and rising age of the congregation. Church board meetings were exhausting, hand-wringing events that took hours and dealt with minutia and worried about nickels and dimes but not concerned with the big picture and not very much with God or what God was calling them to do.

People were trying hard but there was no spirit of life. The spirit was of desperation and fear. And yet there was a glimmer of hope and a persistent faithfulness that attracted me to them. There was a desire to do right, and a hunger to learn what it means to do what is right.

My main question was whether they were really going to be able to change. Were they really willing? What if that meant changes in the worship service? Changes in the way we welcome and involve new people? Changes in the way we budget and spend money?

But one member on the pastor nominating committee said, "We are like sheep, and we're looking for a shepherd. We'll follow. We just need someone to lead us."

When she said that, I was hooked. Somehow I believed her. And time has shown she spoke the truth. There were 13 faithful, inspiring, persuasive, attractive people on that pastor nominating committee. The church also averaged about 25 people per Sunday at that time. So I already knew over half the people in the church by name on my first Sunday. How many new pastors can say that?

Over the years we've been learning about the Sabbath and observing Sabbath obedience that Jeremiah writes of in chapter 17. In chapter 17 Jeremiah warns:

"Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turned away from the Lord. They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness in an uninhabited salt land."

That was the church. That is many a declining, dying church. "Oh, we'll save ourselves by doing more of the same-old-same-old, trying harder and harder." And here I love the Alcoholics Anonymous definition of insanity: Doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results. Striving in the strength of their flesh; trusting in the size of the reserve bank account; a frugality degrading into self-centeredness.

The church was not in good shape. But God took that church and God took this pastor and has led us through profound spiritual changes. As bad as things were, there were still more spiritual breakings that needed to happen. The clay needed to be worked back down to a lump. I had to hit bottom as a pastor and admit that I could not save the church. Church leaders had to do the same thing.

But God has reshaped us into a new and useful vessel. Today the church is about listening to God – listening as carefully as we can. Spending time to honor the Sabbath.

Our board meetings have been transformed into spiritual encounters. It's not uncommon for a two- or a two-and-a-half hour board meeting to include 45 minutes to an hour of prayer, and sometimes most or almost all of that prayer time is spent in silence before the Scriptures, listening for God's voice, seeking to discern the Spirit's leading.

As a way of helping us honor the Sabbath, we have even ceased having worship services on Sunday mornings. We outgrew the tiny, decrepit building and have moved in to share space with a neighboring Presbyterian congregation--a wonderful, healthy congregation, a congregation that invited us because they wanted to support our ministry, not because they needed rent income. So now we worship at 4 p.m. on Sunday. We have a simple supper after worship. People love having their Sunday morning relaxed, unstressed. And we're encouraging people to relax and enjoy God on Sunday morning, not fill it up with more busyness.

Today this church bustles with life. At this church where there were no children at all, now children laugh and play at church--some of them love to come to church and look forward to it. What was an old, aging Japanese congregation is an increasingly diverse congregation of various Asian ancestries, African-American, Caucasian, all kinds of people, all stages of life. New people have come to experience God through Jesus Christ at his church here. The congregation has increased about fivefold. We're shopping for a new building with one-and-a-half million dollars in the bank for a new church site. A church whose total expenses in 1988 were \$33,000 has this year a quarter million dollar budget, a healthy portion of which goes to invest in local and global missions.

But it is all because God has reshaped the church. It was not the pastor, although some casual observers have suggested that. But you ask the folks who've been through the struggle and the glory of the years of struggle: It was God.

God's intention to renew the church is unchanging. Chapter 19 of Jeremiah lets us know that we can go too far in our recalcitrance. If we insist on doing it on our own strength in our same old way, God will condemn a project. But chapter 18 and our passage today show us God who reworks us into a new vessel.

Rev. Sasha Makovkin of Mendocino, California, a fabulously talented potter who's also a Presbyterian minister and teacher, has shared a helpful insight with me. Potters in Jeremiah's day were production potters. They didn't make art for art's sake. Art for art's sake didn't happen until the era of the so-called "enlightenment." Potters in Jeremiah's day made useful vessels. Although

some of it was beautiful art, it was still a utilitarian task. So when a potter at the wheel decided to start over, he would make another pot--a new vessel of the same type or, as we read in verse 4, "another vessel as seemed good to him." That is the way that production potters work.

God doesn't say, "The church isn't working--I'll make a different kind of social agency." God wants to create in us a good and useful church, a beautiful work of art. But if our clay becomes hardened like the jug in Jeremiah 19:10, then, as Jeremiah said, it must be taken out and broken to pieces, and it shall not be mended.

Are you still supple clay? Jeremiah's potter reworked the clay. Can you still let God rework you?

Let us pray the words of Frances Iverson:

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.

Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh upon us.

We pray for Jesus' glory in the church and in his name. Amen.