

Sunday, September 8, 2019

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON

**Shaping Our Future**

INTRODUCTION

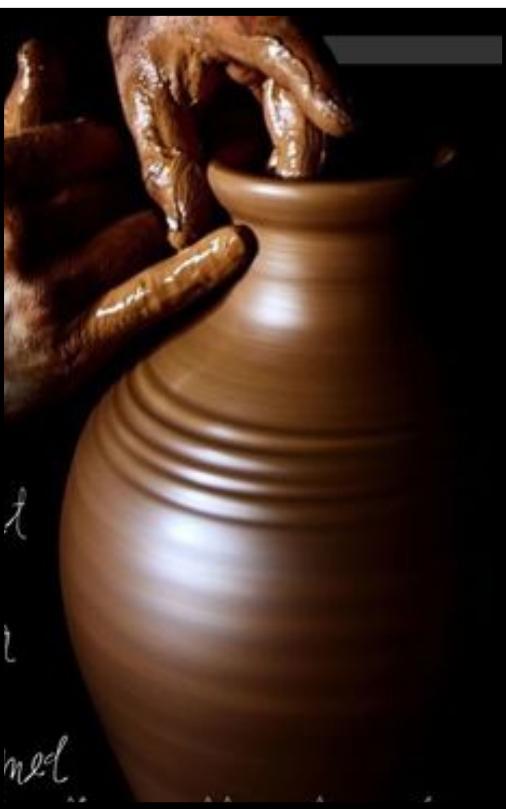
Today's reading comes from the Hebrew Scriptures. It is a memoir story from the Prophet Jeremiah. It was this poor guy that became the embodiment of the

phrase, prophet of doom. It's never easy to speak truth to power but that is what God commanded of him.

Jeremiah writes openly about his deep, internal struggles. Sometimes he writes startling statements about his feelings toward God. He also extremely self-analytical self-critical. Jeremiah is like the Woody Allen of prophets.

Yet, God compelled Jeremiah to lodge scathing indictments against the immoral leaders of Judah and the people who followed them. He proclaimed an urgent warning the kingdom would soon be destroyed.

In today's reading, Jeremiah is given a vivid lesson in God's sovereignty over the people



of Judah. What might **we** learn from this powerful metaphor of God's relationship to humanity? What might we hear that the people of Judah could not?

~~~~~

## SCRIPTURE: Jeremiah 18:1-11

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: “Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.”

So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel.

The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

Then the word of the Lord came to me: 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. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it.

And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it.

Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem:

Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

May God bless us with insight and understanding...



## SERMON

Nothing says, “*welcome back to church!*” like a scripture reading from the one they call, *The Prophet of Doom!* That’s why we got Amy to smooth that edge. When she reads Jeremiah, even bad news sounds good!

Pottery, of course, was a big deal in antiquity. Back in the day, they couldn’t just pick up containers and dinnerware from Homegoods. The potters were valued craftsman in any community. Maybe that is why this “potter-clay” motif shows up so much in Scripture. In the very beginning, for instance, “God formed the human of the dust of the ground.”<sup>1</sup> Human beings are the very first example of God’s skill as the Divine Potter! Then there was Job, who reminded God that he himself had been “molded [by God] like clay.”<sup>2</sup> Another prophet, Isaiah, rebuked Israel for thinking that she, the clay, knew more than God, the potter.<sup>3</sup> And later in that same book we read, “Yet, O Lord, you are our God; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.”<sup>4</sup> There are many

---

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 2:7

<sup>2</sup> Job 10:8-9

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 29:16; 45:9

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 64:8

more potter-clay references in both the Old and New Testament, but you get the idea. Clearly this strong metaphor is worth contemplating from a variety of angles and quite likely holds meaning for us today, but first let us pray.

**Prayer:**

*Creator God, You form us on the wheel of life as a potter molds the clay. I ask that you would shape us into holy vessels, bearing the mark of Your perfect crafting. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen*

This morning, there are over seventy-six thousand fires burning down the Amazon rain forest in Brazil. Most of them, we are told, were intentionally set for the purpose of deforestation to make room for commercial farming.

Last weekend, the most powerful hurricane ever recorded in the Bahamas decimated those islands, leaving behind a trail of destruction and tears.

In the United States, assault weapons continue to unleash their devastation with impunity upon random victims in the public squares and sacred spaces all across the nation.

In the British Parliament, it appears that Brexit is bringing the UK to the brink of chaos.

Our own government continues to impose inhumane rules on migrant children and their families, while the most powerful voices in the land stoke the fires of hate, spewing venomous lies that demonize the most desperate and powerless people who seek sanctuary and asylum from the tyranny and violence of their own homelands.

We live in a rapidly shifting culture that is changing exponentially faster than ever before. Sometimes I feel like I need to buckle up a seatbelt before going on line!

And we, in Concord and the surrounding communities, we, here at TriCon church, are caught in the middle of this ever-intensifying war that is raging like wildfire. The powerful exploit the oppressed, tribalism breeds massive injustice against "the other", and unbridled greed is worshiped and celebrated as success while generosity and caring for the poor and sharing wealth is mocked as impractical weakness.

Ironically, we, in the middle, who do hold great power, wealth and influence, somehow feel powerless to stand against the immoral forces that seem to be thriving. We want to feed the hungry, care for the sick, welcome the stranger and use our influence, wealth and power to fashion a better world that we *know* is possible. Yet, we seem paralyzed in our desire to affect the meaningful and just changes we know are necessary if we are to survive. In the blue bubble that surrounds our Commonwealth, many of us feel like we have lost our voice on the national stage. We are mocked as liberal coastal elitist who are totally out of touch with the real America outside the bubble. This frustration leads to a

dangerous despondency. We simply don't know what to do or how to do it! And, believe me, our gloom and paralysis is affecting our kids.



My wife, Natalie sent me a cartoon she came across that shows two small children playing together with toys on the living room floor. One kid says to the other, "What do you want to be when you *give up?*" Giving up the fight for justice and clinging desperately to the blessings we enjoy in the bubble seems to be the only recourse we have to maintaining our sanity. But what kind of response is that?

While it may be true that this is arguably the most tense and unpredictable time in history, Jeremiah's time was equally, if not more hopeless. The nation of Israel was also in an opaque bubble. They had no idea that

annihilation was just outside their gates. The fierce Babylonian empire was on the move. This was an unstoppable army with an insatiable hunger for world domination. They attacked with such shock and awe that nations were sacked before they even knew they were at war. Judah had become so self-involved, corrupt and immoral that they were completely blinded to anything but their own invincibility. A cyclone of destruction was quickly tracking in their direction and they hadn't a clue.

Jeremiah tried to warn them. He was a close friend and confidant of the king and widely respected. Then, when he began to prophesy their doom, he was simply ignored, they wanted to hear prophesies of peace and prosperity. When he refused to back off, he was actually shunned and then persecuted. Despondent and alone, he questioned his calling, he questioned God too. Yet, God continued to compel him to prophesy Judah's impending doom. If the house of Israel didn't act quickly to change their self-destructive ways, their destruction was certain. When he wouldn't shut up, they publicly ridiculed and mocked him and eventually he became a prisoner of the state. Like many of us today, Jeremiah felt frustrated and powerless. He was true and faithful to his God. He did what he knew was right. Why could no one hear his cries to reform their corrupt exploitation and return to just, civil and moral nation? The once esteemed influencer of the powerful found himself alone and outcast. Jeremiah became angry with Israel. He grew angry with God. He had come to the end of his emotional rope and wanted only to let go and fall helplessly into the dark abyss of resignation and despondency. Does any of this sound familiar? The more he stood up for urgent change, justice and morality, the harder he was knocked down.

This is when the word came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Come, go down to the potter's house." It was there that God clearly showed Jeremiah a critical lesson that remains crucial for us today. It is not human beings who ultimately shape the future. This great

cosmic journey is way bigger and further beyond what we can even imagine. We are, however, essential to the process. We are the clay that is shaped and molded into the eternal oneness. Our own sense of effectiveness, value and worth gets undermined by the outrageous insanity we see each day in our news cycle. Like Jeremiah, we become angry bitter and despondent. But in this story, God teaches us that our only responsibility is to willingly conform our passions, efforts and plans into the hands of the Divine Potter. All of our successes and all of our failures are skillfully and effectively used by the Master Potter, who molds and remolds us into elegant vessels, ready to be filled with God's goodness and poured back out into the world.

As hard as this may be to hear, God is not asking us to fix the world. That would be like the clay attempting to throw itself on the wheel. We are only asked to show up and do the next right thing; stand for justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. In the end, all outcomes are completely in the hands of the Divine Potter who can only create beauty. A God who is only good. A God who breathes on the ashes of death, despair and defeat and new life is reborn and resurrected. This is the good news of the Gospel. This is the way we move forward beyond the insanity before us and live with a real hope, energy and peace, even in the eye of the storm.

TriCon church, as we begin our program year, as hard as it is to admit, let us recognize that it's not us who ultimately shapes our future. We do have the agency to choose. If we want, we can attempt to fashion ourselves into our own grand work of art. We can exhaust ourselves, spinning a warped wheel of our own making. We can struggle in frustration to save a world that refuses to listen. We can nurse our outrage and feed the anxiety that haunts us. Or, we can willingly synchronize with the Divine Potter and trust that we are a work in progress. God says to Jeremiah, "see that messy, unformed, slimy ball of dirt? That's you. But if you willingly choose to come to my potter's wheel, I will gladly take you just as you are, I will mold you, transform you and make you whole."

Our only responsibility, individually and corporately, is to simply show up, be the clay, stand for justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. We may not get our desired outcome or be able to measure the impact we make on the world. We will make mistakes. We will disappoint one another and fall short, but given the opportunity, God will take all of it: our talents, our money, our intelligence and creativity, even our flaws, cracks and perceived failures. God will use all of it, and with a grace-filled touch on the potter's wheel, our messy, unformed, slimy ball of dirt, will be reshaped, healed and offered to the world. In the hands of the Divine Potter our future can only be shaped for good. The choice is always up to us. Amen.