

“The Hands That Are Forming You”

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Jeremiah 18:1-11 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might open our hearts and our souls to the shaping of your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name, Amen.

God was not happy with the people of Israel. They were doing evil without showing any sign of stopping, and God had had it up to here with that. Destruction seemed inevitable. God must have been full of wrath. And yet – and yet, did you hear that metaphor? It's important to listen to what God is saying, but sometimes it's just as important to listen to how God is saying it. If we ignore the metaphor and focus only on the threat, we can easily misinterpret the nature and will of God.

“Go down to the potter's house,” says God to Jeremiah. Have you ever done that? Have you ever watched a potter work? Have you ever thought about what motivates a potter to make pottery? Have you ever talked to a potter about the frustrations and challenges of throwing pots on a wheel? About how a pot can be “spoiled” such that they have to start over? What do you know about clay? If God has chosen this metaphor to tell us something about God-self, we need to take a moment to remember what we know about making pottery.

Here is the fundamental truth of this metaphor, as I see it: God comparing God-self to a potter is a reminder that our God is a Creator God. What's more, creation – or more precisely creativity is rooted in love. The potter does not make

pots because they enjoy having total power over vessels of clay, to shape and form or smash and destroy them as whim dictates. The potter makes pots out of desire to create something useful or beautiful or both. That is the underlying truth of what God is getting at by using this metaphor. Even if God is terribly disappointed in us, that disappointment is rooted in an underlying relationship of creative love.

It's quite a thing to claim that the Creator of the Universe loves you. One of the reasons I love Psalm 139 so much is because of the balance it strikes between an attempt to describe the vastness of God, the omniscience and omnipresence of God, the sheer scale of God and an insistence on God's intimate, personal knowledge of the writer, and therefore also the reader. This One, this Holy One, who knows everything about us, who is everywhere and knows everything and is so much bigger than we can even comprehend, uses some portion of that omniscience on each of us, and our days and our paths and our words and our comings and goings. This One, this Holy One, has hopes and dreams and plans for us, that will lay claim to us no matter how far we stray from the path intended for us. "I come to the end—I am still with you."

The warning about smashing the spoiled pot and starting over was given to an entire kingdom, of course, so perhaps we should hold these comparisons lightly if we're going to apply them to our own individual lives. We would do well to take what responsibility we can for the good and evil of the nation we're part of too. But perhaps it's just a matter of scale. The Incarnation – the central idea of Christianity,

that the Word took on flesh and dwelt among us as one of us – invites us to understand that God is interested in us intimately, personally, individually, for there is no other way to be human than to be a particular body in a particular place at a particular time in history. So if you – you individual human – are, metaphorically, also a clay pot in the hands of a Loving Creator, how have you felt those hands? Where are you in the pot-throwing process? Is the clay that is your life wet and supple, or is it drying out and becoming hard to work with? Are you wobbling, in danger of falling off to one side and having to get squished up and begun again? If you feel like you've already been glazed and fired and cannot possibly be changed, remember that beautiful mosaics can be created with broken shards of china.

What new light could be shed on your life if you consider yourself a work of art in progress? Some of our hardest experiences are the ones that shape us the most. Are those times like having our clay squished back up to start over? Or like having shards of marble chiseled off? “Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it,” said Michelangelo. “I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.” When something is taken away from us, does it occur to us to wonder if we perhaps we're being freed from something that isn't part of who we really are, who God intends for us to be? Or perhaps God is present afterward, when our lives are being re-shaped after a tragedy, into a different vessel than the one we were before, one that is useful and beautiful in a new way. We are re-shaped in so many different ways, some fast and some so slow we barely notice.

You heard me confess last spring to a lifetime of driving way too fast.

Motivated by high gas prices, I had decided to turn over a new leaf and drive the speed limit on the highway. As I told you at the time, this was really only possible because of the existence of cruise control, which kept me from exceeding the limits I had set for myself. It occurred to me recently that I should give you an update. After months of using the cruise control and staying in the third lane from the left, I've noticed that I don't really need the cruise anymore. I've gotten used to staying in that slower lane, and I sometimes even drive slower than the speed limit, depending on who's in front of me. What's more, it doesn't bother me. I'm not wasting energy being irritated by slow drivers anymore. Every once in a while, if I'm running really late, the urge to get into the fast lane comes over me, but usually when it does, I remember that I'll get there almost as soon if I stay where I am and resist that urge to be someone I'm not anymore.

The Holy Spirit is working on us in all sorts of ways. God's hands are constantly shaping us – forming us and re-forming us, whether easily because our clay is still wet and supple, or by helping us break through the hardened structures we've built for ourselves. The important thing to remember is that this God who has intentions for us – intentions for us to be useful and beautiful – is a God of creative love. The re-forming may sometimes be uncomfortable, if we've gotten used to the ways in which our lives are misshapen. Perhaps the life-long task of those who love God is to keep ourselves open to the forming and re-forming of God's hands on our

lives. What seemed useful and beautiful at one point in our lives may not serve a new day. Adaptation is a sign of life, a sign of growth, but it isn't easy. With the support of the Holy Spirit, we can find new purposes for new phases in our lives.

There's a song I want to sing for you today that speaks to this desire to remain open to being shaped by our Loving Creator. It's number 520 in our hymnal, in case you'd like to sing along with me. It's originally a Spanish-language hymn, but I'm going to sing it in English first, so everyone will know what it's saying.

“I want to be, my loving Savior, like the clay in the potter's hands, take my life and remold me, I want to be, I want to be a brand new vessel.” “Yo quiero ser, Señor amante, como el barro en manos del al farero, toma mi vida y hazla de nuevo, yo quiero ser, yo quiero ser un vaso nuevo.”

The Creator of the Universe, the One who formed the heavens and the earth, is working to shape your life right now. Those Hands are moving in love, for love, to form you to love and be loved. God wants to help you be useful and beautiful, a vessel of mercy and compassion, of justice and hope. No matter what stage of your process you may think you're in, God can renew you and reform you. Whether you feel like “unformed substance” or like you've “come to the end,” God is with you, shaping you, guiding you, reforming you. May we open our hearts to the work of the Holy Spirit within us and among us! Hallelujah and Amen!