

## **Shaped by the Potter – Jeremiah 18:1-11 – September 11, 2016**

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There is an area of southern Indiana that is home for a number of artists, musicians and craftspeople. A few years ago I attended a presentation in the workshop of a couple who were both potters. They explained the art of pottery, demonstrating how they could take a lump of clay, spin it on a wheel, add some water, and, by using their hands, could mold it into whatever shape pot they wanted. Maybe something artistic. Maybe something functional. A worthless, messy lump of clay, transformed into something new.

Throughout the artistic process, the potter is in charge. From discovering and choosing the right color and consistency of clay and deciding whether to use a big lump or a small lump. What type of pot might it become? Something tall and narrow? A vase perhaps. Or something squat and wide – a nice bowl. And once on the spinning wheel, if after a time, the potter is not satisfied, she could squish the clay back into a lump and start again. Then once satisfied with the shape, next comes the choice of paint. Maybe some texture, maybe a design or maybe completely smooth. Maybe a really glossy finish, or something a bit more muted. The potter is the creator and all the choices are hers. When finished, she can look at it with satisfaction and joy – the fruits of her art.

And that brings us to the Jeremiah passage. God said to Jeremiah. Look at this potter. If, as he's working, he sees that the pot is flawed, he can take it and rework into another vessel. He can squash the pot, molding it back into a lump, and then reform it – into a pot that isn't flawed. The potter has control over his work. He can choose to keep the good pots and destroy the bad pots. God uses this analogy with the nation of Israel. Remember this is a time of upheaval and unrest.

As God speaks to them through Jeremiah, God says, "Can't I do the same thing as the potter? I made you. At one moment I can pluck you up, break you down, or destroy you. But if you turn from your sin, I can change my mind. If you repent, I can turn away from the punishment I had intended. Or conversely, I can choose to build up or plant a nation, but if that nation turns away from me – if that nation does not listen to my voice – again I can change my mind."

God is the divine potter, forming the clay into the perfect vessel. If a flaw appears, then God can rework the clay, molding and shaping it, until it conforms to the image of the perfect pot. The problem with this particular analogy is that the clay really has no mind of its own. It's just clay. It really can't choose to be flawed or not flawed. It just is.

When God speaks to the nation, through the prophet, God says, you have the choice. I have told you what I intend to do, but there's still time. You can change your flaws. You can turn from your wrongdoing. You can repent. And if you do that, then I will change my mind.

That's the amazing thing about our capacity to choose what we do. We have the free will to follow God's way or follow our own way. But we are never forced, controlled or coerced into following God. The choice is ours.

Humans were not made to be like puppets, dangling from a string, only allowed to do what our Creator says we can do. We have been given free will. We were created with the capacity to make choices, good or bad. Here in this passage from Jeremiah, God says that it's up to the people to choose to repent from their sins or not. And we know from our own experiences, that when people choose to follow a self-serving path, negative results often occur. It doesn't mean that God throws down a curse on us, to punish us or zap into oblivion. Instead, God allows the negative results to happen. It becomes sort of a divine "I told you so."

Here God is trying to awaken the people of Israel and Judah to their mistakes. Continue on this path of doing your own thing, trying to work treaties and alliances with the wrong folks, and ignoring your relationship with your God, then yeah, bad things are going to happen to you. Babylon is going to come in and take over, and your people are going to be dragged into exile.

Free will truly is a gift, but it is also a responsibility to be taken very seriously. Our choices impact more than just the present moment. There are consequences for everything that we do. God, through the law, gave to Israel and Judah a roadmap, a path to help them along their journey. To point out the better choices along the way. Should I do this or this or this? Well, which one of those choices honors God and your neighbor?

It goes back to the potter analogy. God shapes us and molds us. Even when there is flaw, God doesn't just chuck us into the junk heap. God is willing to rework us. To help us, to guide us, and to get us back on the correct path. But God will never force us. And sometimes God just has to throw the divine hands up into the air and let us do what we will. Once the mess is made, then God can step back in and help with the cleanup.

I've got another music story for you. As I mentioned previously, I was a music composition major in college. During my freshman, I wrote a piece of music for our college woodwind trio – flute, clarinet and bassoon. These were exceptional musicians, especially the clarinetist who was a senior performance major. I felt confident that I could write a really difficult part for her. And when they performed it, it sounded wonderful.

A few years later I was asked to have the piece performed again. But this time I had a different clarinet player. He was very talented but only a freshman. I was a little concerned that the clarinet part I wrote would be too difficult. But I was assured he could handle it. And

he probably could have, if he had done two things: if he had actually practiced the music, and if he had shown up to rehearsal more often.

I'm sure you can imagine what happened. During the performance, the piece was a train wreck. The clarinet player had no clue what he was doing, and as much as the other two players tried to keep it together, he just kept messing up. As I stood backstage listening, I felt completely helpless. I was the composer, the creator. But the performance was completely out of my hands. There was absolutely nothing I could do to make it better. Nothing I could do to fix it.

I had written a nice score, which had the potential to be an enjoyable piece of music. Each member of the trio had the skills and talent to perform it well. But because one person in the group chose to not learn his part, the other two players were brought down with him. Afterward he barely could look at me, and he simply gave me excuses. No apology to me or the other two players. He had been busy, and had not had the time to really look it over. It was no big deal. He'd also been sick for a few days, so he was not playing his best and he could only come to a few rehearsals. Et cetera and so on. Bottom line was...he blew it. His choices affected the end result.

God created us, all people, in God's own image. And we were created for God's good pleasure. We each belong to God. We each have the potential to follow God's calling on our lives. We were not created as puppets, dangling on a string from God's hand. We were given free will, the ability to make choices for our lives.

Now we're not just thrown into the world randomly with nothing to guide us. Through scripture and by the prompting of the Holy Spirit, we have been given a roadmap to help us navigate our lives in order to live as God would want us to live. Temptation and sin cause us to want to go our own way and to put ourselves first. When we do stray - and we will - we will have to face the consequences. Fortunately, that's not the end. If we allow it, God, as the Divine Potter, will take us and reshape us, molding us into the people we were created to be.