

18 The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²“Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” ³ So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴ 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.

⁵ Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁶ Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. ⁷ At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸ 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.

⁹ And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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.

Today I want to talk with you for just a few moments about scars, injuries, wounds, hurts and other experiences of brokenness...and the possibility of hope rising from them as a gift from a loving God.

In Maxie Dunham's book, *The Devil at Noonday*, he tells of a place in Death Valley known as Dante's View. From this perch, Dunham says, “You have a choice. You can either look *down* 200 feet to the lowest spot in the continental United States – a place called ‘Black Water’, or you can look *up* to the 14,500-foot majesty of Mount Whitney, the highest point in the continental United States. From this one spot, you can choose to feast your eyes on the highest – or the lowest.

Today's Scripture lesson from Jeremiah 18 calls us, in the midst of our valleys, to lift our eyes to the heights – to the workings of God in our lives and times. The setting of the passage is in one of the many low points in the history of Israel. Although things look okay on the surface, the nation is in moral and spiritual decline. The political system is corrupt and no longer responsive to God's ideals. Cracks are beginning to appear in the success of recent years. And, soon enough, the beginning decline will lead to a catastrophic military defeat that will send the entire population into exile.

And it is here – in the midst of this great national mess – that God whispers a word of hope to the prophet Jeremiah. God tells the prophet to go down to a potter's house and wait for the word of the Lord.

Now one of the reasons I love this story is because, among other things, it teaches us an important lesson about hearing the word of God – about finding God's guidance in times of trouble. Sometimes when we are in situations of hurt and confusion, times when we need God's help and we need it *now*, we desperately drop a dime in the prayer hot-line and cry out to God...

- *What should I do?*
- *What should I say?*
- *How can I find my way out of this mess?*

And, if you are like me, the answer I most often get is that funny little series of tones you hear when you haven't dialed a one or an area code – doo-doo-doo – *“We’re sorry, the number you’ve called, 1-800-GOD, cannot be reached as dialed....”*

To be candid, I have spent many moments in life asking God for guidance through challenging times, but I have yet to hear God's voice break through with a clear and certain answer. Now maybe you *have* heard God's voice speaking to you. Wonderful. But I *haven't*. Instead, I've discovered that there are other ways by which we can hear the word of God.

One of the most important is the way Jeremiah heard God's voice. When Jeremiah needed guidance, he didn't go into his prayer closet and stayed there until the word came. Oh no, instead, Jeremiah went to the potter's house, and it was there – as he observed the events around him – that he *saw* the word of God.

Did you know that the word of God does not come to us as often through our *ears* as it does through our *eyes*?

Why, right there before his very eyes, as Jeremiah watches the potter throwing a pot, it comes to him! The potter is like God! The clay is like us! God is the potter, and we are the clay! And as the potter that day works the clay on his wheel, Jeremiah hears with his eyes a wonderful promise.

First, he notices that the potter's hands are deep within, and around, and through the clay. One of the most important things you and I can know – especially when we're going through times of great challenge – is that God is *up to his elbows in us!*

Right now, a number of people are going through times of great challenge.

- Some are facing death.
- Some are fighting raging battles against illness.
- Some are writhing in pain over the loss of a loved one.
- Some can't sleep at night because they worry about their children.
- Some are struggling to adjust to a new community, others to new debilitating conditions that require them to change their lifestyle.
- Some are terribly lonely.

Even those who are not experiencing personal difficulty right now are challenged at least by the good things they wish they could do...the people they could help...the situations they wish they could improve. Most of us, in fact, can identify dimensions of our lives where there is immense personal and spiritual challenge.

Would you listen to the promise we see in the potter? *Whether you are facing life or death, joy or sorrow, health or illness – whether you are trying to help a helpless person or right an unrightable wrong – you are not alone, for God is up to his elbows in the clay of your life.* It's not entirely up to *you alone* to deal with the challenges that confront you. The very power of God is at work within you, and even though your circumstances may seem to be overwhelming, the potter's hands are holding you and molding you and will not let you fall!

The promise is that the potter's hands are *shaping you into something beautiful and new!*

Did you notice what happens when the potter discovers his vessel is spoiled? Well, first of all, he doesn't throw it away. He doesn't discard it. He doesn't give up on it. Many of us, when we look at our own flaws, and most especially when we consider the flaws and failings of others, throw away all hope. We accept our own weaknesses and the troubling inadequacies of our lives as normal for us, and sometimes continue to inflict them upon ourselves, others, God and the world. We so often see the flaws in others' lives as a kind of unworthiness that cannot be redeemed, or problems that cannot be solved. And we are wrong on both counts.

Part of being a follower of the Jesus Way is learning to believe that the potter can *re-shape spoiled clay*! You see, that's the *heart* of the word of God that Jeremiah hears with his eyes in the little pottery shop on Main Street. It's an important word for Israel and a vital word for us.

Even though our lives are full of incongruent bumps and dents and ragged edges, God is not willing to give up on us, but rather will break us down, and work us anew, molding us, shaping us into more than we are right now...If we are willing.

You see, the key to the passage is the offer God makes...
Turn to me. Allow me to shape you a new future! And I will!

Recently, a patient of mine as a hospice chaplain, came to the close of her life's journey. When I met this person, just weeks earlier, she was terribly beaten up by life. A virtually hopeless, she had traveled into some of the darkest corners of existence, and in the process was abused in ways that you and I can only imagine. If ever there was a spoiled and broken piece of clay, it was this person.

I sensed that God had a special love for her because when we started meeting, she would look at me as though she was desperate to hear some word of God; a rare moment these days in that space at the end of life.

I could tell she was searching for *something*, just by the way she sat and listened. I don't know exactly how it happened, but one day she got that look on her face like her eyes were lifting from the depths of Black Water to the glorious heights of Mt. Whitney. I think she caught a glimpse of the promise...that God was up to his elbows in her life and had never given up on her becoming everything she was created to be. I think she caught sight of the potter.

One day she asked me to meet her for a special conversation at her nursing facility. She wanted me to help her pray that God would forgive her for the past and all that was broken and wrong in her life. She wanted to turn to God and find hope for a new future. We held hands and cried, and she prayed, pouring it *all* out to God.

Moments later, her journey was complete. She yielded herself to the potter's hands.

I've been thinking a lot about her lately. How clearly I saw the word of God in her and her life.

- God was the potter.
- She was the clay.

And the potter fulfilled that promise. Her legacy is not as a broken woman at the end of life, but as beautiful and priceless vessel, filled with joy, and overflowing with the grace of God.

Dear friends, as we come to the Communion Table today, remember that God is the potter. You are the clay. And as you eat the bread and drink the cup today, take hold of the potter's promise in the midst of all the realities you face.

Let God shape you into a *masterpiece* of grace! May it be so, Amen!