

The 13th Sunday after Pentecost
September 8, 2019
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Jeremiah 18:1-11
Psalm 139
Philemon 1-21
Luke 14:25-33

Day by day, dear Lord, of thee three things I pray:
to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly,
follow thee more nearly, day by day



We'll sing it later this morning out at Shevlin Park just before we read this morning's gospel.

And I'll offer a word of caution: careful what you pray for. It's a lovely song (and loved by a generation, perhaps, who remember the 1970s (and *Godspell*)), but be advised that if we pray or sing to "follow thee more nearly," we may yet find ourselves challenged to do just that, challenged to, in the words of today's gospel, "carry the cross and follow" the way of Jesus.

The tune may be gentle, but make no mistake, the meaning is hard. And I don't want us to soften the hard edge of it. That's a persistent temptation for any of us ... and for all of us.

The *Good News Bible* suggests that Jesus would never tell us to "hate" anyone – and there's a point there; this is hyperbole, no doubt. But I think they rather miss the point when they say that Jesus merely suggested that we should love him more than our parents and siblings.

No, Jesus' radical and disorienting point is that his "kingdom values" should supplant their version of "family values" and cultural norms. So he asks us to reject what most folks take for granted: family, clan, and kin do not tell us who we are; our social security is rooted in a larger sense of family that reaches out especially to those outside in our too-small family circles.

I think St. Paul, in our second reading this morning, gets the gospel point. And that's why he can presume to disrupt Philemon's "family values" and cultural norms and lay down a hard demand that he give freedom to a slave.

Oh, on the face of it, Paul's only asking a favor. But notice he addresses the letter not just to Philemon but to Philemon and Apphia and Archippus and the local church there. Paul says he doesn't want to command Philemon, but, again, this is a public letter (and he reminds Philemon – and everyone else – that he's an old man and in prison!). And then, when Paul offers to pay Philemon for whatever he's owed, he says he won't mention that Philemon owes Paul so much more ... even as he says, "I won't say anything about that."

All of this is big stuff. And I hope I don't seem too evasive, but I don't really want to say more about these hard words. I'm much more drawn to the other readings this morning.

In our first reading, Jeremiah is told to go the local potter's house. And there he observes what must have been an everyday scene ... and it occurs to him that it's really a parable of sorts, an illustration of how God works with nations, with communities, with each of us as individuals.



The point seems clear enough to Jeremiah. As he sees it, if the people fail to turn and change their ways, God will do to them what a potter does with a spoiled pot – and more. God will pluck up. God will break down. God will destroy. But if they do turn and amend their ways, perhaps God will repent of this evil and not destroy.

It's a solid point ... and historically confirmed in the destructive arc of what follows these words and the people's failure to heed the warning.

But for all that I cannot help but wonder if Jeremiah, the prophet, the preacher, misses the point of his own parable. After all, any good image or story is likely to be open to more than one interpretation.

When I set aside the prophet's dire interpretation and commentary, and when I simply go back to consider the evocative scene of the potter working at the wheel, I notice that the potter never plucks up and destroys the clay. Even when the vessel being made is spoiled in the potter's hand, the clay is reworked. Potters never waste clay. Nothing is destroyed. Nothing discarded.

So, if a good story or image is open to more than one interpretation, I wonder if Jeremiah's interpretation has rendered God too small and inflexible and harsh. For in the end, the God of his imagination seems awfully constrained by what we do – or fail to do.

So I go back to the potter's house and would ask us to imagine the scene ... and the point.

For my part, I'll readily admit that I don't know much about making pottery, so I'll defer to Melissa Myers, a United Methodist pastor, who shares a story about an experience she had with a potter one day:

I was watching a potter throw some clay at a county fair ... I watched as she would mold. And add some water. And shape. And spin. And focus. And chat with the crowd.

And when she was finished, it was amazing to see this [beautiful] piece that she had created out of this lump of clay.

And someone asked when it would be fired, so that they could purchase it.

And she looked at the piece, and smiled, and she said, "Well, this isn't going to be fired. It's no good." And she crushed it.

The crowd dispersed, some ... frustrated that they had seen something be created only to be destroyed, and some laughing at the absurdity of it all.

But I stayed and asked her why she did what she did.

And she said, "Oh, the clay just wasn't cooperating tonight. If I fired that piece, it would have shattered. So, since it didn't want to work with me, I'll leave it for now and we'll get back to work again later."

"So the clay has a mind of its own?" I asked.

"Oh, sometimes it does. Sometimes I want the clay to be a bowl, but it wants to be a plate. Sometimes I want it to be a large mug, but it wants to be smaller. Sometimes it just doesn't want to do anything at all. You just have to listen to it as you're working it.

"Sometimes you can almost whisper to it and make it be what you want. But even that doesn't always work ... You have to be patient. You have to listen. You have to be strong. You have to love the clay into what it needs to be."

What a different way to look at the potter and the clay. Not as forcing the clay to be what the potter wants it to be, but slowly and lovingly encouraging it to be what it needs to be. And sometimes the clay doesn't respond the way that you want, and that makes the creating difficult and maybe even a painful process. And sometimes the bowl needs to be a plate.

And when both the potter and the clay come together, something beautiful will be created. ⁱ

And if this is how God is potter to our clay, perhaps the parable is nothing to be afraid of. Perhaps it's not a threat, but a promise ... and a word of reassurance, and an invitation:

Can I not do this 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.

