

The Uh-Oh Button

Jeremiah 18:1-11 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Potter and the Clay

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.” ³So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴The 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.

⁵Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁶Can 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. ⁷At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸but 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. ⁹And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰but 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. ¹¹Now, 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.

¹⁴ Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

It’s always fascinating what sticks out to me from scripture when I’m looking at it to teach to somebody else. And what sticks out to me here in the metaphor of the potter is this phrase that the clay “was spoiled in the potter’s hand.” Now I’m going to confess that I don’t do pottery. I’ve watched people do pottery in Historic Jamestown in Williamsburg, but I’m not going to sit down at a wheel and make something out of clay. In fact, you can ask anybody on the Soapstone children’s council, they know I will teach, I’ll speak in front of people,

I'll sing, I'll play music, but I'm just not a crafty kind of guy. My creative, expressive side just does not come out through visual art. But I can relate to that sense the potter would have where something he's working on suddenly drops in value.

When I was a kid and my family would go to the beach, my dad, for some reason, would always tell us the same thing. I could be looking for shells on the beach or digging in the sand to make a sandcastle and he'd say "Look for doubloons." I don't know why he thought I was just going to stumble upon treasure, but he said that to me so many times, I'm positive I was the only English-speaking four-year-old who knew the word "doubloon," and that meant gold coins from sunken ships. I don't know if my dad just wanted to inspire wonder in his kids or if his inner child had watched too many Hardy Boys episodes, or what, but I heard him tell me a thousand times to look for doubloons.

I was about nine or ten and we were at the beach and I was digging a moat for my sandcastle. And I see something shiny buried down pretty deep. And I thought "it can't be." And so I start digging around it and this thing is starting to look bigger and bigger. It's gold and it's round and it's in this woven rope pattern, and then I see in the center of it there's this big white pearl. And I can't believe it. But it is way down deep in this hard-packed sand and I cannot get the thing out of the ground so I shout over to my dad "Dad, Dad! Come here!" And he's kinda grumpy at first like "what? What do you want?" And I told him "you're not gonna believe it, but I found a gold doubloon." And he kinda laughed like "okay, a doubloon, sure," but as he walked over and looked in this hole in the sand I could see the surprise and the excitement creep into his face. He really couldn't believe it. So he gets down and we're both digging around this thing and finally my dad

manages to pry it out of the sand and he holds it up and he's looking at it, and he flips it over in his hand and I see this little spike sticking out of the back of it and I'm thinking "what is that?" but Dad starts laughing. And he puts it in my hand and said "Danny... it's just an earring!"

It was this giant piece of costume jewelry and I could see that as soon as he said it. It was like the value of this thing evaporated right in front of my eyes. In just a couple seconds I went from thinking "We're gonna have a vacation home in Hawaii," to "well, where's a trash can for this thing?"

But that's where my reaction diverges from the metaphor of the potter. That's where my reaction diverges from God's. Because the verse says the clay is spoiled in the potter's hands, and there's not even a full stop there. No pause to assign blame. It's not "the potter made a mistake," not "the clay was being obstinate." I looked this up in the Message translation and the verse there says "Whenever the pot turned out badly, as sometimes happens when you're working with clay..." No blame, not judgment (yet, anyway), Jeremiah just says the potter reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

I was also reminded of this program we used to use in the computer lab when I was in elementary school. It was this art program called Kid Pix and it was like MSPaint on steroids. You could do all these cool effects, and there were stamps in different shapes and designs, and you could set your paint brush to paint in one color or in rainbow, and you could manipulate shapes after you drew them, and thinking back, it was really an impressive piece of software for 1993-ish when I was in early elementary school. But my favorite part of this when I was like a first and second grader was what we called the "Uh-Oh Button." Now I'm not sure that's actually what it was called, but that's what my teacher called it. There

was this guy making an “Uh-oh,” face and when you did something in your artwork that made you say “uh-oh,” you clicked him and it undid it. And it looked like this [Chip, put up picture]. There he is in all his 8-bit glory. And he was so much better than the “Undo” button that we have nowadays, because he would make these fun sounds. There’d be a little high-pitched alarm that would go off when you clicked him, or sometime he’d go “Doh!” like Homer Simpson, or sometimes he’d do this: [Chip, play sound].

I’ve gotta wonder if the potter would do that when he realized his clay pot was not how he wanted it to turn out. Or if God does that when he sees a sinful people that need to be reworked.

The potter is so much more invested in the clay than I was in the doubloon I was digging for or any art I could have ever drawn on the Macintosh LC. God is invested in his creation, in his people, too invested to just chuck it out. And whether or not the Father has an emotional reaction in a Kool-Aid Man voice when he sees the problem, he begins to rework it.

One of the first things we talk about in Confirmation class is the big picture view of God’s story, of Creation, Sin, and Redemption. How God starts out in Genesis speaking things into being, and looking around and seeing that they are good. And we make it a whopping two chapters of the Bible before sin enters the world, and the whole rest of scripture and history is the story of God redeeming his creation, reworking it, bringing it back into right relationship with him. But all of that work of redemption, that’s creative too.

My friend Tim is a United Methodist pastor, and he’s now serving a two-point charge in Rodanthe. Some of our youth and leaders from Soapstone got to meet him a few weeks ago during our youth beach mission trip. But before Tim

was serving there, his very first appointment was to this little, dying country church in Currituck County. When Tim got there, there were six member on the roll. And he was basically sent there with a mandate to do some redemptive work in that place. So everything Tim did had to be creative. He wanted to start a men's ministry, but instead of chartering a United Methodist Men's group there, he started a motorcycle ministry. And the people in that church weren't really sure what to do with that, with this twenty-five-year-old preacher fresh out of licensing school starting a motorcycle club... until their church started filling up on days that he would schedule rides. All these bikers that he met would come to church before they went out wherever they were going that day. The Currituck County sheriff actually didn't quite know what to do with the new preacher and his biker buddies, so they actually started a file on him and classified him as a gang leader. I'm sure that was fun to explain to the District Superintendent.

But out of that ministry grew another one. Tim started to meet all these people with bad tattoos. Prison tattoos and gang tattoos, or a tattoo of somebody's name that they didn't want as a permanent part of their body anymore, or white supremacist tattoos, or ones inked by somebody who needed a little more skill as an artist. And Tim is a guy with more than one tattoo, and he'll tell you himself that more than one of his tattoos are not great. So Tim went out and got a license and some equipment and hired a tattoo artist, and set up a tattoo ministry. In what was formerly the pastor's office in the church building, they had a tattoo parlor. And one Saturday a month, people could come, *for free*, and have their bad tattoos reworked. Covered up, or made into something new, and beautiful, or at least something spelled correctly. Tim, and his congregation in Currituck County gave their neighbors the opportunity to hit the "Uh-Oh Button"

on their tattoos. And the people who participated in that would talk to Tim and tell him how grateful they felt, and how much freedom they felt to not have these bad tattoos anymore. One guy told Tim that not having these visible gang tattoos anymore was going to change the kind of jobs he could apply for. Sometimes letting God hit the “Uh-Oh Button” hurts, but it’s freeing and it’s a step to something.

Because God as the potter doesn’t rework his vessels just so they’re pretty and pristine and perfect. He does it for a purpose. Much, much later in Scripture there’s another reference to pottery. Paul tells the Church in Corinth that **“we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”** (2 Cor. 4:7) My friend Mark likes to quote that verse and remind people that the treasure in that verse isn’t us. It’s not the clay pots. It’s the gospel of Jesus Christ. We God’s people, we God’s fragile, breakable, imperfect, reworked, clay pots have been made to carry the love of God around with us.

Jeremiah knew all about that purpose, from the beginning of his own story and his Call that Laura talked about the week before last, where God begins to rework his attitude when Jeremiah doesn’t even want to be a prophet, doesn’t think he’s capable of doing the task God has created him to do. But he also knows about purpose on a different scale, the one of God’s people to whom he’s preaching. We sing songs about these verses and they tend to use singular pronouns. We heard one already, “*I give my life to the potter’s hand,*” and we’re going to sing another one at 11:00 that says “*I am the clay. Mold me and make me...*”

But here we are with Jeremiah preaching to all God's people and telling them what's coming. In verse 11 God tells Jeremiah to say "I am... shaping evil against you..." and to "turn now... from your evil way." Over time, Jeremiah talks to people and to kings who bounce back and forth between religious reform and apathy. Between worshipping God and worshipping idols. But Jeremiah doesn't stop here either and spend any time listing off their sin. Those things that separate them from God. Because most of the time we know, right? It makes us uncomfortable, but generally we know our own sin. We know what we let get between us and our Creator.

So Jeremiah just quickly comes to the "or else" part of this message, the gloom and doom ahead. And we're not always comfortable with these wrath and judgement verses either, but there they are. God through Jeremiah doesn't beat around the bush here. When he says "I'm shaping evil against you," it's like he's saying "I am hitting the 'Uh-Oh Button' one way or another." He can rework his people through what he's sending at them... or he can rework them when they choose themselves to turn away from evil.

The Hebrew word where we get our word "repent," in Scripture really just means "to turn." Because when we turn *away* from something... we're also turning *toward* something. When we turn away from our sin, our evil, our disobedience, we're turning toward God. And what a beautiful idea that while the potter is about his task, reworking his vessels, he's at a wheel. He's turning, turning, turning his creation towards him. Towards his creativity. Toward his redemption. Toward his purpose. And he gives us a choice to turn with him, even when we feel like we're spoiled in his hands.

Glory to God. Amen.