

“Pottery Lessons”
a sermon
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Jeremiah 18:1–11

My friend, Heather, is a potter. It started, I believe, years ago when she and her husband, Ollie, were in Ireland. While he did his work as a student pastor, Heather took pottery lessons. She apprenticed herself for those few months to a master potter. And so she learned the skill and the craft of pottery.

It was a tremendous experience for Heather, one that has stayed with her. She eventually began her own studio out of her home, and from it she produced beautiful pieces of fired earthenware: bowls, plates, pitchers, vases. She made these things out of a love for the craft of pottery. But a big part of all this for her, it seems, is the connection she would feel with God as she engaged in this careful and elemental work of the hands, work that reminded her of the several images of God as potter that she knows well from scripture.

Especially lovely and meaningful, then, are the pieces she designed to be used in worship: communion chalices and plates, ash and oil bowls, nativity creches, foot washing bowls. These items of molded clay reflect her faith in God. And so, Heather’s name for her little cottage industry is quite fitting. She calls it “Sacred Mud.”

Jeremiah, the prophet, had a sacred mud moment, involving a special kind of pottery lesson. He had a vision from God, and through it Jeremiah was led to visit the local potter. He watched the man work: with wet clay and spinning wheel, throwing, shaping, molding. The clay would come together into something approaching a shape recognizable as useful, a vessel almost complete in form and function. But then something would go a little out of kilter, a rough spot in the clay that had not smoothed out with the rest, and the difficulty of that rough spot, its disagreement with the rest of the clay, was amplified on that steadily spinning wheel. So the potter would take the whole mass from the wheel, scrunch it up into a ball, and throw it back down on the ever rotating wheel.

“Look at that, Jeremiah,” said God. This was what God wanted Jeremiah to see. It was the reason for this little field trip to the pottery studio. The scene of potter and clay, the actions of one over the other, the absolute freedom of choice that the potter had with the clay — this was an example for Jeremiah, an object lesson for him of the ways of God with the nation of Judah and, truly, of any other nation.

This was an important lesson for Jeremiah. He needed to see this image of potter and clay, and perceive by God’s guidance that it showed something of the ways of God. For that is indeed the way things are with God, as much as people try to forget. God is free. God is sovereign. God has power to create and to destroy, to give life and to take it away.

As seen in the potter, God’s power is a power to forgive, and to forgive even those who had no right to be forgiven, who had squandered many opportunities for forgiveness.

It's a power to decide that a nation formerly marked for extinction will instead continue, indeed thrive, a power to say, "You know, I, the Lord God, have changed my mind about those people." God is free to do this, free to give new life to those who, late in the game, respond to God's frequent pleas for repentance.

That, first and foremost, is God's freedom and power, the freedom and power of "Yes." But God has the converse freedom and power, too, the freedom of "No." God is free and has the power to decide, "You know, enough is enough, I've had enough of these people. Even though I made them, and made them for good, I will draw their days to a close and bring others into existence to take their place." God is free to do this, free to remove from the scene those who *refuse* to respond to God's frequent pleas for repentance.

That's what Jeremiah was shown in the potter and the clay: God's freedom and God's power. But he was also shown something about himself and his fellow people of Judah. He was shown something about the obligations that belong to the people to whom God is gracious. He was shown something about *obedience*.

For it seems that, in Jeremiah's time, obedience to God was not valued so highly. It's as if there was so much emphasis on God's commitment to the nation of Judah, to the city of Jerusalem and the temple established there, that they felt no urgency in answering God's grace with their own obedience. Their attitude seemed to be, "Do what you want, and God will forgive." Their attitude seemed to be, "Hey, human beings may be fickle, but God is steadfast and sure. And God would not abandon our great nation nor forsake the covenant God made with us. God is reliable, even if we are not. What need we fear?"

Of course, some of this is true. Human beings *are* fickle. God *is* steadfast and sure. But not all of it is true, especially the assumptions that seem to have been drawn from it. For it cannot be true that God is unconcerned with obedience. It cannot be true that God doesn't care what people do. It cannot be true that all the obligations were on God's side, and none on the side of God's people.

In that pottery lesson God gave Jeremiah, God rejects the lie of cheap grace, God puts down the false notion that God is powerless in the face of unrelenting disobedience. It is not true that God is made impotent by the promises God has made.

And so too does God reject the equally false notion that a people can have no future with God because of the wrongs they have committed. Yes, God can be gracious to those who, even after much delay, respond to God with obedience. The delay might appear to some to be a case of "too little, too late." But God was free: free to decide to forgive or not, to save or not, to give life or end it.

So this pottery lesson was a grave message for Jeremiah's neighbors. But it was also a message of hope and possibility. The pottery lesson was for them and it was to tell them this: if you repent and obey God, then God will stick by Judah; but if you do not, then God will not. The end will come, and it will come decisively.

And that was Jeremiah's pottery lesson. So, is there a lesson for us? You bet there is. This is one of those passages about which I wonder whether there is really any need for me to say a word about us, so obvious I believe its message is for us today. But I think I should say a bit about what lesson there may be in this for us.

God is free, and God has the power, to forgive, to make alive, to keep a people of witness and faith in existence. But God is also free to conclude the days of that people, should God decide to do so. It's within God power to do this. It is God's right to do it. And very often God's decision in these matters appears to be based on the obedience or lack of obedience that God sees in those people, in a community of faith and witness.

We can't get around this by taking refuge in sentimental notions of God's love and kindness. We can't get around it by claiming our Christianity as some sort of moral free pass. Yes, Jesus came to save sinners (among which we are fine examples). But Jesus forgives sinners so that, even in their sin, they might be set on a path of holiness. Jesus is the love of God toward us so we may respond to God with love shown in obedience. Our passivity notwithstanding, there is no love of God without obedience of God, no Christianity without the Christ who forgives sinners and calls them to live in the joy and new life of their forgiveness.

This is true, not only of individuals, but of groups as well, of the communities of Christians we call "churches." And it is here, with church congregations, that I find the connection with the scripture passage most compelling. For Jeremiah's vision concerned a people, not individuals. So I don't think the message for us is that if we don't obey God, then each of us as individuals is in mortal danger. But I do believe that what God's Word instructs us concerns us as a *congregation*. And what it would have us learn is this: that our continued vitality, our future as a church, depends not on our creativity, nor our wealth, nor our frugality, nor the reputation we cultivate in this neighborhood. It depends on God. And what God wants to see from us is obedience, as individuals and as a whole congregation.

From Scripture we should take this warning: that without continued obedience to God, this congregation has no chance of survival. Truly, it has no right to survive.

Now, in spite of us, God might continue to hold us up. And so we could go on our way, making do, putting our time in (perhaps all the while hoping the preacher doesn't go too long), passively trusting in God's grace even as we see no need to respond to that grace in what we do. But that is no way to be a church. That is no way to be a Christian!

Sure, it's plenty common. But it does not fit with God's intention. It has no bearing on Christ's call. And eventually, with such churches, God decides that enough is enough — best to scatter those people and allow new configurations of faithful to carry on God's work, to live out obedience to God, to show the following of Jesus that marks a disciple, to display the fruit of the Holy Spirit in their daily lives.

What is this obedience of which I speak? Well, it's not so easy to say. Much of what God tells us to do is changeless, but some of it is for a particular time or place. God might tell you one day to go, and on another day God might say "Stop."

But there are some things that I think will entail obedience for us, in our time and place.

Without a doubt, obedience will mean the inner spiritual disciplines of prayer and study of the Bible. You know, we're getting better at this. There are a number of you who have taken to reading the Bible more and to praying regularly. This is great. This is necessary. And more of this can happen. We should all commit to reading the Bible regularly. All of us should be praying, every day. Maybe you're tired of me saying it, but I shouldn't stop. For immersion in the Bible and regular prayer are vitally important. We

cannot be obedient to God without listening to God. We can't discern God's will without seeking God's will where it is revealed.

In addition to these, obedience will take more public, outward form. And here it becomes a little trickier for me, the danger of getting too specific, a danger of merely offending while not benefiting. But I believe that there are some outward disciplines that clearly will be part of our obedience, things like worship and study. We do these pretty well. I'm told that Sunday worship reaches and blesses many of you. And our Sunday school program is strong and getting stronger, as well as our several Bible studies and small groups. But there is certainly room for growth, and there is room for improvement, even on Sunday morning, say, in *depth* of participation, and in attentiveness.

Beyond these, I speak only at even greater risk, and can only say what I think God is calling us to embrace and to leave behind. So, with that danger and risk fully acknowledged, let me suggest a few of these. It seems to me that obedience to God, the potter who is molding us into a people of witness and faith, entails the setting aside of some default behaviors of ours and the adopting of others.

It means that we stop treating money as our savior, as it seems that this congregation has done for far too long, and that we instead treat money and wealth as but one tool that God gives us to use for bringing glory to Jesus.

It means that we stop gossiping about each other, that we stop bearing grudges against one another, that we put an end to criticizing others behind their backs, and it means that we instead start seeking the forgiveness and reconciliation that Jesus commands of us.

It means that we stop saying what we cannot do, as individual Christians or as a congregation, and that we instead say, clearly and often, what we *can* do, not by our own power, but by the power of Jesus Christ, for as it says in Philippians, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

In ways such as these, it seems to me, we have the opportunity to show our obedience to God.

My dear friends, God has blessed us with so much. Through Jesus Christ, we have forgiveness, the promise of new life, reconciliation with God and with one another. We are being molded by the master potter upon his wheel. All that the potter asks of us is our response, the willingness to take that step of obedience, even if it is halting and uncertain.

We can take that step. God gives us the power to take it.

Will we?