

C Lectionary 23 9.4.22

Jeremiah 18:1-11; Luke 14:25-33

Focus Statement: We are a project God never gives up on.

My senior year of college I decided to take a ceramics class. Gonzaga has a really broad liberal arts curriculum, so an art class may have been required, I don't remember. What I do remember is I specifically took the class because I was writing my senior thesis that semester, and I thought a ceramics class would be a nice, relaxing break from that.

Unfortunately, I should have taken my ineptitude in the fine arts into consideration before signing up for this class. I was a complete and utter failure at ceramics. To the point where, as the deadline for my senior thesis was drawing near, this capstone accomplishment upon which my graduation depended, it was ceramics that was waking me up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat. I started having this reoccurring nightmare where I was sitting at the wheel trying to throw a piece, and it kept collapsing in my hands. Again and again, I'd reform the piece, again and again it would collapse before me.

And before you think nightmares about ceramics were overblown, I couldn't possibly have been that bad, let me assure you, I was. I ended up taking an incomplete in the course and finishing it up spring semester, because the professor took pity on me. The other option, and the option my work deserved, was for him to fail me and for a ceramics elective to be the class that kept me from graduation.

To give you the end of the story, I did end up passing the class eventually. Luckily my friend Ellen was an excellent potter, good enough that she was doing an independent study that semester and had a key to the studio. This meant we could go in after hours when it

was empty. Ellen was also gracious enough to spend a lot of time coaxing me through what I needed to do, and those spring afternoons spent lying on the grass outside the art studio talking and waiting for the kiln to heat up are some of my fondest memories from college. I never got good, and I have no intention of ever taking another pottery class. It wasn't fun and even by the end of that second semester, the professor made sure I knew my grade was a pity C, based on effort rather than quality of product. But I passed.

I thought about pottery and my failed attempts at it when I read the Old Testament text for today. At first glance these words from Jeremiah, all the texts for today really, seem like some pretty tough words. But I know a thing or two about destroying things on a pottery wheel, unintentionally destroying them, but still, so the more I thought about the Jeremiah text, the more I started to hear something more.

This text from Jeremiah comes in the middle of a series of prophetic pronouncements. For several chapters now, God has been speaking to Jeremiah about the sins of Israel and Judah and the need for them to change their ways. Prophets, remember, are truth tellers. Their job is to speak to the people about what is. And the message God showed Jeremiah is pretty easy to understand. The vessel the potter made was spoiled, the potter broke it down and reworked it into another one, one that "seemed good to him." So too then, are Judah and Israel spoiled, so too, might God "declare concerning a nation or a kingdom; that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it." Which are terrible words, a terrifying announcement. And if you just read that, you think, oh man, God is mad and this is going to end poorly for Judah and Israel, what hope is there in this passage.

But remember this is a metaphor about clay. And here's the thing I learned about clay, because I made a LOT of spoiled vessels. Clay is a very forgiving medium. Clay isn't like marble, where you chip something wrong, and your sculpture loses a nose. With clay, if you screw it up, you can mush it back together and try again. And you can do this again and again and again, as many times as it takes to get what you want. And, and this is the big and, and you can do this without getting rid of your original mound of clay. Again, marble, one slip and that block is done for. With clay, you can just keep working, moving, maneuvering, forming and molding and shaping, until, and this was the part I was bad at, slowly, subtly, almost by magic, the vessel begins to take shape. In the hands of a skilled potter, the work looks effortless, but it requires patience, steadiness, and a touch that is both firm and gentle. This clay metaphor causes me to hear in God's words of destruction not a doing away with, but a rebuilding into something that is in the end good.

The firm persistence necessary in pottery leaned me from Jeremiah into our Gospel text for today. This is another one where you wonder if the disciples considered getting someone besides Jesus to run their recruitment efforts. Not a done of us are going to get on-board with hating our entire families, and I'd guess even less for hating life itself, but that's what Jesus demanded from his disciples. We can sit here and unpack the meaning of the word translated here as "hate," and talk about how it's not so much about creating hostility anger and hostility as it is about being unafraid of conflict, but the point here is the same. Jesus always offers the harshest teachings to those closest to him. Unlike like a lot of the religious groups of the time, a lot of the religious groups of our time, including Christianity,

if we're honest with ourselves, you can stumble into the Kingdom of God. But once you're in, you better believe Jesus is going to make you work, and work hard, within it.

We go from there to these two twin parables, which R. Alan Culpepper refers to as Fools at Work and at War. Who would build a building if they couldn't finish it? They'd look foolish. Same with a king, what kind would enter a war he couldn't win? Those stakes would be even worse, not only would he look foolish, but his subjects may lose their faith in his leadership, their trust in his rule. Lose too many foolish wars, and you aren't going to be king for long.

The text goes from building to war to the disciples, but there's a third, implied example nestled in the middle here. If a builder wouldn't build a building without considering his options, and a king not start a war, how much more than is God, who has ever so much more wisdom than a builder or a king, committed to the completion of the project God has started, the work of redeeming the world.

That, dear people of God is the promise of this passage, the promise that makes all this challenge at least attemptable, this promise that God has not entered into the work of redemption unknowingly. God has weighed the obstacles, God has counted the costs, and in the person of Jesus Christ, God has committed to the experience. God, therefore, is all in on redemption. God is not going to give up on the project, to jump back to an earlier metaphor, not going to throw away the clay until the vessel is finished.

And so the disciples too, we too, can enter into the work God is calling us to in the kingdom. Work that will be hard, yes, but work that is in the end God's own work. Work that will not be finished until all of creation is brought into God's kingdom. There may be, probably will be, many false starts in this work. We are not the Potter, but students of the Potter. Our hands are not as firm, our patience not as solid. But God is committed to the work of creation, to the work of us. And as many times as it takes, God will break down the parts of us that are broken, building them up again with patience and skill. Thanks be to God who is all in on the project of us and of creation. Amen.