

13th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 18C

September 7, 2025

Jeremiah 18:1-11

Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14:25-33

The Potters Hands

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Dianne Andrews at
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA.*



In my last few moves... from Pennsylvania, to Seattle, to a storage unit, to Port Townsend, and most recently to a second abode here on Bainbridge Island... I have gradually shed possessions that I have moved across country four times. Because space is limited in my Port Townsend house, I have carefully curated what I keep out on the shelves... and have as little as possible stored away in drawers and closets. In making decisions about what to keep and what to let go of... I have often chosen one possession out of a few... to represent a certain period in my life, or a special relationship. Each of the objects I choose to keep has meaning for me. Each is also representative of many objects that I have released out of my life. When I look at one of my living room shelves and see my mother's doll from the 1930's... with its hand painted curls and pale calico print dress with lace trim... I think of Mom. Colorful pictures that my son Cameron painted when he was a child... are hanging in the stairway that goes up to my bedroom. Many times throughout the day, I walk past Cameron's framed tempera paintings and recall sweet memories of my precious son. Some objects that had been in deep storage for many years, and are now on display, including a ceramic piece that my Grandfather Boone made when he was teaching ceramics, history and civics at Lodi High in California. I especially love the 8-inch teapot with its irregular gray green glaze, stubby spout, ample handle, and beautifully recessed lid. What I like most about the piece... is that it could not be mistaken for a factory-made teapot. Traces of the human hands that squeezed and formed the pliable clay into a beautiful, usable vessel... are evident. I especially love the fact that I can turn the pot over and see the name "Dan Boone" that has been scratched into wet clay. The teapot is clearly the work of skilled hands that have transformed shapeless clay into an object of beauty. That teapot is now on display in my Winslow apartment.



In today's lessons, we hear from the prophet Jeremiah who invites us to, "Come, go down to the potters house." Come meet with the artist, the craftsman, the one whose firm and gentle hands pressed in on, pulled, and drew clay upward to transform earth into clay vessels to be used in everyday life... used for holding water or storing grain. In the second chapter of Genesis, in the second of our two creation stories... the first creation story being the six days of creation with a seventh day of rest... in the second creation story, "God formed Man from the dust of the ground

and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”¹ Pots are formed from the same substance from which God sculpted human beings and brought them to life, according to the second creation story. In the ancient world, potters’ houses were everywhere, they were ubiquitous. Jeremiah used a familiar, well-understood image of a potter’s house to convey a message about God’s concern for a struggling and broken people. Jeremiah is also offering an image of God that is not that of a parent, or a king, or a judge, or a lover, or even a teacher... images of God that we find elsewhere in the Bible. The Hebrew word that Jeremiah uses for “potter” is based on the root “yastar” which means “to fashion” or “to form.” In today’s story, God is an artist. Jeremiah wrote six and a half centuries before the birth of Jesus, in time of on-going conflict between warring kingdoms. Late in his life, Jeremiah would, himself, experience the terror and grief of a Babylonian siege that would send the people of Israel into exile for 70 long years. The Babylonian exile lasted more than a generation.

As a prophet, Jeremiah exposed and named the many sins of his time... idolatry, lying and slander, and the oppression of foreigners, widows and orphans... to name a few. Jeremiah’s prophetic message was basically a call to return again to God... as a people and as a nation. Later in, in the 24th chapter of Jeremiah, we hear, “Then I will give them a heart to know Me, that I am the LORD; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart.”² Even in our time, God continues to long for our return.

The prophet’s words were recorded on scrolls that would be unrolled and read to a gathered people. The biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, whose own voice was passionate and prophetic, opened a series of lectures on the prophet Jeremiah with this prayer:

You are the God who inhabits the scroll. We do not know how. We do not doubt. ... We praise you even about the weird and objectional parts of the scroll, partly by habit, partly because we do not listen very much, partly because we hunger and want a word addressed to us. We thank you for this radioactive scroll that has been set among us. With all of our criticism and all of our orthodoxy [the scroll] is not tamed or domesticated or made special. Let it shatter, offend, heal and transform. For this time, position us in front of this scroll. Let it vex us, and stir us and make us new. We pray in the name of Jesus a sure child of the scroll. Amen.

The messages of the prophets are at the heart of our faith tradition. The prophets’ words are meant to stir us awake, challenge us, and make us new. Today’s story of the potter does not offer abstract, theoretical ideas. The story of the potter is earthy, embodied, and hands-on. It is a story that does not offer a simple “feel good” message. When I hear Jeremiah’s story about the potter, I have a physical, visceral response to the prophet’s imagery. I can feel the potter’s steady hands at work shaping and forming a people into beautiful, inspired forms.

¹ Genesis 2:7

² Jeremiah 24:7

Some things to know about potters:

- A skilled potter will place clay in the very center of the wheel. Clay that is not placed in the center of the wheel may start wobbling and gyrating before eventually flying off the wheel. Centering is essential.
- A skilled potter will apply just the right amount of pressure when forming the clay. Too much pressure from a single thumb can be enough to render a nicely forming pot into a collapsed mess of clay that may well... fly off the wheel.
- A skilled potter will know that correct body position is essential and will pay attention to keeping the spine straight and arms anchored firmly on the thighs. Full attention is essential.
- A skilled potter will use the right amount of water while shaping the clay. Too much water, or too little water, can make the clay unworkable.

Finally, it is important to know that potters never waste clay. A mound of clay that is spoiled in the potters hands... will be reused, reworked, reshaped and formed again... until the vessel is pleasing to its creator. A potter is to pay full attention when shaping a vessel, and if the clay collapses and is spoiled, a skilled potter will gather up the clay and begin again. The process of creating a pot is smoothest when the potter and the emerging creation become one.

When encountering Jeremiah's story of the potter, we need to remember that the prophet was writing to warn the people of Israel that... if they didn't return to God, if they didn't yield to the creator's hand... doom was in their future. The people were ignoring the poor... and abusing their power among their own people. The house of Israel was in conflict with the kingdom of Judah. Invading armies were at the city gates. Inaction from the people could be their own undoing. And yet, God was offering a second chance... a re-forming... a re-making... that can only happen if the people repent and return.

God asks Jeremiah to convey to the people the urgency of the situation. The people of Israel needed to be remade. They were in need of conversion, of transformation. They needed to return to the center and yield to the creator's hands. God asks the people to turn away from their evil, misguided path... and to repent... that they may be remade in a form pleasing to God.

God's voice continues to be heard in Jeremiah's words... as God yearns for us to return... and to return again.

"Then I will give them a heart to know Me, that I am the Lord; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God for they shall return to Me with their whole heart."

Let us pray,

Creator God, we entrust our lives to your loving hands. Vex us, stir us, shape us, re-form us. We offer up the whole of ourselves to you. Heal our brokenness. Fill us with your inspired vision that we may reflect the beauty of your truth and be used in service to the glory of your name. Help us to return home to you.

Amen...