

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: February 19, 2012
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“CLAY POTS”
Jeremiah 18:1-10

Things are looking grim.

Men are going to worship one day, and to bed with their neighbors' wives the next. Violent crime is becoming commonplace. Witnesses are perjuring themselves in court. Big landowners are exploiting and even enslaving foreigners, orphans, and widows. The social fabric is fraying to near disintegration.

Most people profess orthodox religion. Yet they have re-imagined YHWH as a deity to be manipulated and appeased. They have reframed worship as a transaction, in which the LORD must fulfill their requests if they celebrate the right festivals, make the right sacrifices, and pray the right prayers.

Where is God in this? What is he doing?

★ We know God has been watching. He says as much in Jeremiah 7:11: **“I have been watching!”** But where is he as he watches this train wreck? Is **“God... watching us from a distance”** as the old Bette Midler single goes? Or is he close enough to smell the carnage?

★ We know that God has been speaking through his prophet, warning the people: {Jer 7:3} **“Reform your ways and... actions”** lest judgment fall heavily, pleading with them, **“Return [to me]... for I am merciful”** (Jeremiah 3:12). But will he back up his words with action?

Where is God when the world is on its way to hell in a hand basket? *What is God doing* to, with and among his people as things fall apart? These questions are as relevant and necessary here and now as they were in 7th century B.C. Judah.

- Jeremiah 18 has some welcome answers. Verses 1-3 set the context.

- Verse 1: **“This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD.”** Jeremiah does not speak and act on his own. His words and deeds reflect the heart, mind and will of God without distortion.

- Verse 2: **“Go down to the potter’s house, and there I will give you my message.”** Sometimes, Sovereign LORD lays the whole plan out for us to see at once. More often he reveals it a step at a time.

- Verse 3: **“So I went down to the potter’s house, and I saw him working at the wheel.”** Fired pottery is used for drawing water and storing wine, olive oil, fruit, grain, and other foods. Potters make some vessels especially for cooking, others for washing clothes. Specialized jars contain professional supplies like wax and glue. Fine vials are ideal for perfumes and ointments. There are many “potter’s houses” in Jerusalem.

- Verses 3 and 4 describe the action: **“So I went down to the potter’s house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.”**

■ It is an apparently unimportant scene – until we read the analysis in verses 5-6: **“O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?” declares the LORD. ‘Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.’”**

► As for the LORD’s vantage point, he is not watching “from a distance.” He is near enough to see into our souls, to hear every unuttered thought, to smell the fragrance of life and the odor of death upon us, to taste the sweetness of our righteousness and the bitterness of our sin, and to feel everything that we feel. YHWH is as near to his people as the potter is to his clay.

→ I am reminded of Psalm 139 {5, 7-10}:

**You hem me in – behind and before;
you have laid your hand upon me....
Where can I go from our Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths,
you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast**

Kind and merciful God is everywhere in the cosmos *and* fully present to us. He upon whom our existence, sustenance and redemption depend is attentive to you and me. He sees every pleasure and frustration, desire and satisfaction, success and failure, victory and defeat, dream and nightmare, hope and fear, joy and sorrow. He who

loves us best perceives everything that happens in, to, and around us. Nothing escapes his sight. This is comforting, is it not?

Holy God is everywhere *and* fully present to us. The Perfect One who commands holiness is utterly attentive. He sees when we {Dt 6:5} **“love [him] with [all our being]”** *and* when we don’t, when we {Lev 19:18} **“love [our] neighbors”** *and* when we don’t, when we {Mic 6:8} act justly *and* unjustly, mercifully *and* mercilessly, humbly *and* proudly. He who hates sin perceives every attitude, thought, word and deed. Nothing escapes his sight. It’s a bit disquieting, isn’t it?

► As for what the LORD is doing, he is shaping and forming and molding us.

This unsettles people for at least two reasons.

✎ 1st, it means God has the right to decide our purpose and how it will be achieved.

The potter freely chooses to turn a lump of clay into a sacred urn for religious ceremonies, a prosaic little jug for everyday use, or a costly vessel to hold great treasures. It is up to the potter, not the clay. God is God, we are not.

I am stating the obvious. But some who profess Christ’s lordship strongly resist it, and those who do offer themselves as living sacrifices struggle now and then.

✎ 2nd, the formation process can be painful.

☑ Imagine that we are at the potter’s house, observing the ceramic process. It starts when the clay is dug out of the ground and brought to the potter.

It has too many lumps and impurities to be useful, so the potter dumps it into a trough and soaks it in water. Once it is soft enough, the clay is stirred until the lumps disappear and it becomes slimy mud.

This muddy clay sits, undisturbed, for roughly six months. The longer it sits, the more it improves.

Later, the potter scoops it onto a table and pounds it with a wooden mallet, in order to remove air bubbles. (Big air bubbles explode in the kiln, shattering the pottery. Small ones make fragile spots that will crack later on.)

After the potter beats the clay he puts it on the wheel. As it spins he kneads and presses and squeezes and molds it into the form he has chosen.

Every time he sees or feels a flaw in the clay, he collapses it down and starts over. But as long as the clay is pliable, the potter will keep refining it until he produces a satisfying vessel.

Next, it goes into the oven. The intense heat (up to 2,190 ° F in 7th century B.C. kilns) binds the clay molecules tightly together. It is a slow process: heat the clay too quickly, and it is liable to fall apart; remove it from the fire too soon, and it will be poorly bonded.

Then the pottery is glazed and fired a second time. Large or small, sturdy or delicate, plain or fancy, the vessel is finally ready and useful.

If the clay were capable of sensation, it would feel pain. God's formation of us also involves suffering. Yet his shaping and molding is also immensely comforting, for at least three reasons.

✈ 1st, it means God really cares about us.

Like us, physical clay can be suitable or not. But at least it never talks back to the potter, or tries to climb off the table. (By the way, when we do that we are behaving more like silly putty than clay!)

Even so, YHWH is not quick to wash his hands of us. He risks misunderstanding and rejection, patiently enduring our stubbornness and folly and whining, persistently investing himself in our lives, for our sakes.

✈ 2nd, it means God has a great vision for our lives, for what we will do, but even more who we will be.

○ What does Romans 8:28 say? **“In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”** **“The good”** of which the apostle speaks here is not pleasant circumstances, worldly success, monetary wealth, or bodily health; rather, it consists of our ultimate good, which is to {1 Co 15:49, NRSV} **“bear the image of the man of heaven.”**

○ As Romans 8:29 explains: **“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers”** and sisters. This is **“the good”** – *our* good as well as his – for which **“God works”** **“in all”** circumstances and events: our conformation to the spirit, mindset, and character of Christ Jesus.

✈ 3rd, it means God is generous (he blesses us with gifts we have not earned) and merciful (he withholds the punishment we have earned).

■ Jeremiah 18:7-8: **“If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.”** Human repentance cannot roll back time and undo evil deeds; yet Sovereign God generously acts as though it does.

✈ But 4th, it also means God takes us seriously. He treats us as free moral agents who, for good and for ill, are responsible for our choices.

■ Verses 9-10: **“If at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.”** It is not that the LORD is indecisive; to the contrary, it is that he decisively takes our actions into account as he decides to act for or against us.

Where is God when the world is on its way to hell in a hand basket? He is very near.

What is God doing to, with and among his people as things fall apart? He is shaping, forming, and molding us.

Will we be good clay suitable for his uses? *Or will we be bad clay*, unsuitable for his purposes?