

A sermon preached on September 8th, 2019 based upon Jeremiah 18:1-11 entitled, "Lessons Learned in the Potter's House: How to Teach Kindness"

Last week we heard how Jesus watched people at a dinner party jockeying for position for the coveted seats that conveyed status, leading him to say, *"all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."*

That is what the Spirit of God is constantly moving in this world to bring about: the humbling of those whose pride has made them a burden to themselves and others, and raising up those who have been brought low in life.

It's not surprising that we hear the same theme this week from the book of the prophet Jeremiah, because bearing witness to this humbling and lifting-up work of the Spirit was what the prophets were all about.

It said that that the prophet's task was *"to comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable"* – not a particularly enviable job. Prophets generally had to be dragged kicking and screaming to this work. The *"comforting the afflicted"* part is hard enough – the *"afflicting the comfortable"* business can be downright dangerous.

Who likes to be called out on our arrogance and pride, our lack of compassion and our self-centeredness and its impact on the lives of others? But the prophet was obliged to announce the simple unrelenting truth of human life: "Pride cometh before a fall."

Jeremiah lived in a time in Israel's history that may resonate for many of us with our present moment in history. The communal values of the nation were moving in the wrong direction. The present King, a guy named Jehoikim had abandoned the attempts at moral reform instigated by his father who sought to bring communal life more in harmony with God's Word and its call for justice. The nation was losing its true center in God, embracing idols, which simply means they were exalting values to ultimate importance that weren't worthy of holding the center place. People cared more about material pleasure and comfort than they did about the plight of the poor, neglecting God's commandments regarding the widows and orphans and the aliens in their land. Sometimes this idolatry went so far as to offering of child sacrifices to these pagan gods.

God called Jeremiah to pronounce judgment on the King and his people, which didn't make Jeremiah a very popular guy, getting him accused of being a traitor to his people, at one point getting him thrown down into a deep, deep well.

In the particularly memorable passage we heard this morning, God commands Jeremiah to go down to the local potter's house to watch him at work (it was generally men in those days). He does so, taking note of how the potter would take a hunk of malleable wet clay and place it on the center of his wheel and then proceed to spin the clay, shaping it with his fingers.

As Jeremiah watched, he saw how oftentimes the shape that would begin to form would become imbalanced in relation to the center of the wheel, creating a form that was displeasing to the potter, at which point a kind of destruction would take place. The potter would break down the evolving misshapen form, returning it to its original malleable mass of clay at which point the process of re-shaping would begin anew.

What Jeremiah had just witnessed take place on the potter's wheel expressed the fate of Israel. The evolving form of their communal life was displeasing to God, and due time God would render judgment and bring down destruction upon the land.

The process of the potter at his wheel is a powerful metaphor regarding which I would like to make a couple of observations.

First, there truly is a moral order knit by God into the universe, an order first expressed in the Ten Commandments and most purely and precisely in the life and teachings of Jesus who declared that we are put on this earth to love God, and to love our neighbor.

To truly love God is to live out our true center, and it is in doing so that we live in harmony with the moral order, expressing the love with which God knit together all creation.

To lose the true center and transgress this moral order has dire consequences. A price will be paid.

There is some comfort to be taken here when we witness people living with great dishonesty and cruelty, sometimes in ways that directly harm us or people we love intimately. We can trust that such persons will ultimately be held accountable. We can let go of the despair that can come upon us from watching the wicked seem to go on their merry way with consequence. Rest assured, in God's good time they will be brought low.

The second thing I would take note of in this metaphor is that although the potter (God) is the one who is ultimately in charge, the implication is clear that the clay (you and me) have some kind of choice to make: whether to cooperate with the intentions of the potter to shape it (us) in a particular way, or to resist these intentions. It challenges us to recognize the freedom of choice it is our responsibility to acknowledge in life and not to allow ourselves to simply be carried along passively by the prevailing values the world is promoting.

And the third thing I would call attention to is that clay itself is affirmed as good. The misshapen clay isn't thrown out into the dumpster. No, its form is broken down in order that I may be reshaped into something beautiful and useful. In every warped and misguided life there is good stuff deep down that needs the opportunity to be re-formed.

This is good news for all of us, because all of us feel can identify with those broken pots. There are times in the lives of all of us when we struggle with feelings of

worthlessness as though we have no value and deserve to be thrown into the dumpster. We are assured here that there is an inherent goodness to the malleable clay that is our lives.

The metaphor of the potter's wheel also provides some insight into those feelings of worthlessness that befall us. They arise for two reasons.

First, we lose our true center. Our little egos take the center place, but they are not capable of holding that position. When our little egos take the center place, they will take the place of the ultimate judge of our lives and ultimately render a judgment of our worth that our egos are imply unequipped to make. God is God and we are not, and if we can surrender to this truth that the center belongs to God alone we will discover this truth to be good news. The one who alone can render judgments on our lives – although the true God knows all our, many failings – this God never views us as worthless. Quite the contrary, we are of infinite worth.

The second reason we struggle with feelings of worthlessness is because we have not yet fully embraced the form that God is seeking to bring about in the malleable clay that is our lives. It need not be some great high calling – it will rather most likely be a very humble calling – but it will be a form of serving in which we give expression in our own imperfect way to the Spirit of God which is love in our little corner of the world. It is our particular way of following in the way of Jesus.

The final thing I want to say about the metaphor of the Potter's wheel is that it describes an ongoing process in all of our lives. God's unseen hands are continually inviting us to cooperate into being shaped into a vessel of God's love. Perhaps it would help to view the more painful times of our lives as a process of breaking down in order that we might be reformed into something more useful to God.

Now, this being the start of Sunday School, as well as the beginning of regular school for our children, I want to attempt to draw some connections to what this passage is telling us.

I listened to an NPR podcast that Justin called to my attention on the subject of, "*Can kindness be taught?*"

Kindness is the practical embodiment of love. To be a kind person is to live to some degree in harmony with God's moral order.

The podcast began with some surprising results of a study of middle school students and their parents. The students were asked, "Do you think it is more important to your parents that you be 1) successful (as in achieve good grades) or 2) kind.

80% of the students stated that it was more important to their parents that they be successful. When the people running this study revealed the results to the parents,

they were stunned. The parents assumed that simply by pouring endless love into their children they would grow up to be kind people.

But it doesn't seem to work that way. The children absorbed the dominant values of the society around them which implied it was more important to achieve the big pay check, the big house, than to be a person of kindness. How much that is wrong with our society – all the ways that the hunk of clay that is our communal life – can be traced to this distortion of values?

With the publicity that bullying and its consequences is getting, it is laudable the greater attention being given in schools these days to cultivating qualities like kindness. But I think there are limits to what schools can do in this regard. The deeper message will inevitably be: focus on getting good grades.

And I think that at this moment in time we'd be foolish to look to our political and cultural leaders to model kindness for us.

So one thing I want to simply say is simply to point to the importance of participation in Sunday School and a church community: these are places where kindness should be cultivated, and if we're failing to do that, we shouldn't exist.

Ultimately, of course it is parents who have the greatest role in "teaching kindness" – they are called to embody the Spirit of the unseen Potter's hands shaping the spirit of the child. And in this regard, two things matter:

First, parents must be role models for their children. If the children witness their parents practicing kindness, they are more likely to grow up to be kind themselves. And the practice of kindness they need to witness is not only within the family, but outside as well: with strangers, particularly those in special need of kindness

The second necessity for parents to teach kindness is that they take the time to respond to the "teaching moments" that arise in the course of life in regard to kindness or the lack thereof.

When little Johnny takes Tommy's toy away from him, it is not enough to say, "*Don't do that!*" Time needs to be taken to reflect on what has happened. "*When you took Tommy's toy from him without asking, how do you think he felt?*" "*Sad? Angry?*" "*What were the indicators he was feeling these things?*" "*The tears in his eyes. The shaking of his arms.*" "*How do you think you would have felt if Tommy took your toy when you were playing with it?*"

This is the practical reflections that cultivate a capacity for empathy, which is the motivation for kindness.

Such parenting requires a certain "mindfulness", which involves recognizing part of the truth of the Potter's house which was that we need not get caught up in dominant

currents of society. We have the freedom to choose to act differently, in harmony with the love of God. We have choices to be made in the day to day interactions we have in life.

The unseen hands of God are continually at work in our lives, inevitably breaking down and building up. Perfection will always evade us. But perfection isn't required. I want to finish with a verse from Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians. *"We have this treasure (the very spirit of God) in earthen vessels to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."*

If we will yield to the shaping of the unseen hands life will lead us into humility and we will become vessels of a love that is beyond our human capacity to love. Our lives will show forth the handiwork of God.