

Sunday Sermon
September 10, 2017
“Reworked Vessels”
Jeremiah 18:1-6, II Corinthians 4:5-7

Introduction:

Sid and I come from a long line of potters. For seven generations now, our family has been making pottery out of the clay of North Carolina.

I did not get the potter gene. Hence, I had to go to seminary. But Sid has been making pottery all his life. He took off some years to serve as a Marine in Vietnam and then to study chemistry at NC State. But most of the time, Sid has been turning pottery.

He has been recognized as a “North Carolina Living Treasure.” He has been on television documentaries and in magazines and newspaper articles. He has been featured in the *New York Times*. His work has been shown on the *Antiques Roadshow*. And a couple of years ago, he received from the governor the state Heritage Award for his lifetime contribution to the cultural tradition of North Carolina.

And yet, I do not think his father, my Uncle James, ever got over Sid’s quitting his “real” job as a high school chemistry teacher to become a full-time potter. Uncle James, who was a potter and a farmer, would shake his head and say, “It don’t make no sense to me. People come from all over, even New York City, to buy this stuff; and they pay good money. I don’t know what they think is so special about it,” he would say. It’s just old pots, made out of common clay.”

We are not that special, the apostle Paul tells the Christians in Corinth. We are just old pots made out of common clay. But that is what God uses, Paul says, so that it may be clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

You see, in Paul’s day, people did not have safety deposit boxes or safes for their valuables. So they hid their coins or their jewelry or other treasures in something that looked worthless, like old clay jars.

I always found it significant that our earliest Luck ancestors who are buried in Moore County have old clay jars for their grave markers. As if to say, “We are not special, just old pots, made of common clay.” Having seen their pictures, Sid and I can testify our ancestors did not look all that special.

But the remarkable thing, Paul says, is that is what God uses. And in the hands of God, we become vessels of God’s redeeming work in the world.

I.

Our Old Testament lesson gives us the story of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah had become depressed and discouraged with the people of Israel and their sinful ways. So God said to him, “Come down to the potter’s house. I am going to show you how I work.” Jeremiah went, and he saw the potter making a pot. But it was spoiled, not right, so the potter mashed it down and remade it into another vessel. And Jeremiah heard God’s message: “Just as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand.”

Now we are inclined to take this picture literally. After all, the illustration that God gives Jeremiah is pretty literal. And in Genesis we read how God created Adam from the dust or clay of the earth, breathing life into his nostrils.

But the challenge for us is to look at the second vessel and see the reworking. The Master Potter is still working on us, reshaping us. And it is not just individuals. God was reworking the people of Israel as a community of faith. God is reworking the people of First Presbyterian as a community of faith. Reshaping, remaking us to be vessels of God’s redeeming work in the world of today and the future.

II.

Pottery tells stories. Archaeologists can look at potsherds, broken pottery, and tell you all kinds of stories about the people who made them, their time period, their culture, their art, their tools, their commerce, and so on.

We have a jar Sid turned for me and my husband when we got married. It has traveled with us everywhere we have lived. It has a crack on the top lip where we glued a piece back after movers broke it. That jar has been through a lot with us—moves, hurricanes, holiday decorating, children, and grandchildren. We treasure that jar.

We have another jar Sid’s father turned for my mother and father when they got married. That jar is now 75 years old. Sid has jugs made by our grandfather. He has a lard jar made by our great grandfather, almost 150 years ago. Those jars are part of our story.

Pottery tells stories. Sid thinks I am crazy because I like to get his flops. I like to go to the back of his shop to see what he has thrown over to the side as rejects. They are my favorite pieces, because they tell stories. Because we are created to look like this [pretty vase]. But more times than not we flop and end up looking like this [flopped vase].

No doubt Paul was thinking of story of Jeremiah at the potter’s house when he gave the clay jars metaphor to the Corinthians who were struggling as less than perfect Christians. Paul was remembering how discouraged Jeremiah was that “the pot the potter was shaping from clay was marred (spoiled) in his hands,” and

Jeremiah realized the material with which God works is not perfect. The lives with which God works have failures, mistakes, sins.

III.

We have such a difficult time getting that message. Every Sunday we confess our sins; we hear the good news that in Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Yet we still believe that God is looking for perfection. Yes, God wants us to turn from our sinful ways, but God does not demand perfection. Perfection is not possible on our own.

“Do you not understand that what I work with is marred clay?” God says to Jeremiah. Jeremiah needed to hear that. The Corinthians needed to hear that. We need to hear that.

I remember watching Sid when he was making a pitcher, and the handle would not go on to please him. It looked great to me but not to him. So he took a wire, peeled off that part, and tried it again. Again, it looked great to me, but still it did not meet his standards.

I remember thinking, “It looks fine. Leave it alone.” But Sid stopped the wheel, collapsed and wet the clay, and started again. Only this time as he pulled up the clay, he flared it out and made a vase instead of a pitcher. It looked even better than before, and he sat it over to the side to be glazed and fired.

You see, it is the potter’s nature to create something beautiful and useful. So if the clay does not respond or the piece becomes flawed, the potter changes the clay, so that from it something good and functional can be created.

Conclusion:

Clay jars were an unlikely place to put a treasure in Paul’s day, but turns out they were a great place. Flawed, sinful people are an unlikely place for putting the treasure of God’s Word in this world, but turns out God uses unlikely people.

Just common clay jars, full of flaws, not very special. And yet in the hands of God, we become the vessels of God’s redeeming work in the world.

God, you are the potter. We are the clay. Shape us, mold us, fill us, use us.
Amen.