

January 11, 2008

## THE POTTER AND THE CLAY...

### Introduction

I have three objectives for this sermon on The Potter and the Clay. Let me share them with you at the top so that you will know where we are going and how we plan to get there.

1. First, I want to introduce you to a friend of mine, a fellow traveler. I confess I have never met him, or spoken to him, never even seen him. But, we have been wandering down the same road together for forty years. Like a couple of other old friends, I do not have to be with them to treasure the friendship. I think I have often heard his voice, or maybe it is just that I have felt his presence. We have searched for the Will of God together; we have argued with each other; and we have made similar petitions to the Lord. His name is Jeremiah a major prophet of the Old Testament.

2. Second, I will sketch a couple of the things that Jeremiah said and did back in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC (BCE, if you prefer) especially in Chapter 18.

3. Third, I plan to ask you a simple question for you to answer on your own.

Finally, I promise to close the sermon with a story, which I hope will make you smile.

### I. The Man

I am not sure you would have liked Jeremiah, if you had been there in Judah, around the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> Century BC. Granted, he had a good start. He was born into the home of Hilkiyah, a saintly priest who was descended from a long line of priests beginning with Abiathar. The problem was that he had been expelled from the Davidic Line by King Solomon because of Abiathar's suspected allegiance to Solomon's brother not Solomon, three hundred years before. But people have long memories, as you know. Some scholars guess that some of Jeremiah's anger could be rooted in that historical resentment. It does happen, like Romeo and Juliet or the Hatfields and the McCoys of long ago.

Anyway, by 650 BC Hilkiyah was in charge of a little temple in the town of Anathoth, about 2 miles NE of Jerusalem, Bethlehem is 5 miles south. You might say that Jeremiah grew up in the manse, as the son of a small town pastor. Being a preacher's kid has its blessings and benefits, but it is legendary some do not

**always follow in the footsteps of their fathers and mothers. It does not appear that Jeremiah did.**

**Oh, he loved the Lord alright, but he had a peculiar way of showing it. He had violent mood swings. In one he actually cursed at God. He had a horrible temper. He was invited out to a fancy dinner one evening and he smashed the expensive wine glasses on the table. He blurted out exactly what he thought. He would have flunked the Dale Carnegie course on how to win friends and influence people. Poor man. He infuriated his brothers and friends and became so vitriolic, they thought he was crazy. They told him to shut up or they would kill him. (In much the same way the brothers and friends of Jesus, 700 years later, ran Our Lord out of his home town of Nazareth and threatened to kill him too.)**

**Nobody liked Jeremiah. Oh, I suppose his mother did, but what mothers did in those days often went unnoticed. Some would say, using our modern words, that he could have been bi-polar, or obsessive-compulsive or just plain unsociable. He had no friends. (Little wonder.) He never had a wife or children. God told him not to marry; sad, unless of course you have another tale to tell about that. When he told The Lord he was lonely and needed some friends, God said “Hush, I will be your friend.” And God gave him an almond walking stick to carry around to remind him that God was with him every step of the way. I tell people on canes to remember Jeremiah’s staff.**

**Somehow, as the Lord God works in mysterious ways, he, The Lord God, chose Jeremiah to be his Prophet in Judah. He tells the story himself in the First Chapter: “The Word of the Lord came to me, saying, before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you...” (1:4)**

**Let me step aside a minute and ask you if you think that is true with you and those you love? “Before I formed you in the womb,” Jeremiah heard God say, “Before you were conceived, I knew who you were and what you would become.” That’s ponderous. It says that God has already decided when and where you and I would come to earth and The Creator knows at birth what he wants each of us to do. That sure sounds Presbyterian to me. Stretch it out a bit and ask if it means that God knew from the Beginning that punctually on time, I would be standing here in this pulpit preaching to each of you whom he already knew would be here. That’s almost too much to believe. But, here we are.**

**Anyway, to get back to the story: when his call came, Jeremiah complained to God that he was too young (he was about 20), and anyway he hated giving speeches. “I can’t do it Lord, get somebody else.” There began a life long dialogue where Jeremiah was always trying to set God straight, like some other people I have known. But God always wins. When Jeremiah said: “I can’t be a**

prophet, Lord. I'm scared to death to stand up in front of people." God said, much as he had said to Moses when Moses said he s-s-s-stuttered, "Hush now, I know what you can do, and anyway, I will be with your mouth and give you the words to say."

And, in that instant, he became the envy of every preacher everywhere worth his or her salt: that God might be gracious enough to put words in our mouths.

Later, Jeremiah told God that God did not know how to make a world: "I could have done it better myself." he shouted. "Where are you when I need you?" Maybe you noticed in the Charlotte Observer yesterday the feature article about Bill Hamilton, an old acquaintance of mine who was famous decades ago as a "death of God theologian". God made the world and then he went away somewhere, to be heard from no more. Peculiar. But they believed that God was not around to help his children anymore, and each of us must learn to fathom a world where God is not in charge. Death of God Theology is more complex than that, to be sure. But Jeremiah had a touch of that in him, not so much that God was dead but that he did not seem to care anymore.

Up in the little village of Anathoth, he told God that no one listened to him. "They poke fun at me and picked on me. It's awful Lord, and you do not even seem to care." God replied, "Listen, Jerry (I think God called him that), 'If you have walked with the men on foot and they have wearied you, how will you run with the horses? If in a safe land you fall down, what will you do in the jungles of the Jordan?'" (Jeremiah 12:5) Which being interpreted means, if you cannot manage the pressure in a tiny Village, how on earth are you going to survive when I take you down to the huge City of Jerusalem? If you cannot be faithful where the living is easy, what on earth would you do if life itself caved in? You have it nice down here, why don't you appreciate it?

Remember when Job complained to God that God did not know how to make a world, God thundered back: "Hold on Job, where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Where were you when I set the stars on their courses? And, who taught the birds to fly and the rivers to flow and the horses to run? Did you?" And poor Job whimpered back in Chapter 42. "Forgive me Lord; I know in my heart that you made everything. I have uttered things I do not understand; things too wonderful for me. I'm sorry."

It does not say what Jeremiah said when God chastened him. But he struggled on and on, going from one crisis to the next. His book is the longest prophecy of all. It seems as though his scribe, Baruch, followed him around and wrote down almost everything he said. It reads more like an historical novel more than a

sheaf of drab old lectures. We could linger, but it is time we focused on the message in Chapter 18, a familiar story to most.

## II. The Message

In Chapter 18 God told Jeremiah to go down to the Potter's House, where pottery was made, and to just sit down and listen. Be still. "I will come and speak to you, when I am ready." Once in a while people tell me they have been searching for God for years, but they have never found him. Like Koheleth, the author of Ecclesiastes, they look everywhere under the sun and they still come up empty. I usually say, and Jeremiah taught me this, you do find God by looking for him, not usually. Why not try sitting down and listening, because God is already looking for you?

When I was 5 or 6 years old, I got lost one day at Woolworth's Five and Dime in the east end of Pittsburgh (I have never forgotten it.) I was afraid and frantic, naturally. So, I ran all over the place looking for my mother. I couldn't find her anywhere. Until, exhausted, I sat down on the floor and cried. And don't you know, in a minute or two my mother came around the corner and smiled: she had been looking for me.

So Jeremiah went down to the Potter's House and watched the potter, doing his work - basically the same way as you can see it being done today in one of the potter's shops around western North Carolina. There was a wheel, spinning around, back then by a foot driven pedal. Some still prefer to do it that way even, but usually we use an electric motor. There was the wheel, the clay, and the potter, working at the clay. God told Jeremiah to hush up and watch.

As the master Potter proceeded, now and then something would go wrong. Humpty Dumpty fell off the wall, but nobody knows why. Sometimes things just happen. Clay is not as predictable as it looks and the clay on the wheel was spoiled. And even potters have bad days. But, no big deal. The potter did not throw up his hands and shout and run down the street screaming to high heaven that he was a failure. He didn't stomp off into the cold, blame the wheel or the clay and give up being a potter. And mainly (Are you listening?) he did not throw the spoiled clay away. He calmly picked it up, rolled it together again, and he put it back on the wheel. And then he worked it into another vessel, (listen) "as seemed good to the potter to do." (18:4)

God turned to Jeremiah and said: Got it? That's the way it is. "Like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hands," you and all the people of the earth. I am trying to shape you into what you are destined to become, the way I want you to be.

**It was like that all the time in the Bible. Nobody but Jesus was perfect; and because He was, we do not have to be. Adam and Eve made a mess of it in the Garden. God drove them out, but he did not throw them away. Moses refused to go down to Pharaoh to let God's people go, because he s-s-s-stuttered. But God did not send him back home. He told Moses to go, and that he would make Aaron do all the speeches. Elijah ran away, but God followed him to the mountains. And David got involved with a beautiful married woman who lived next door. God punished him, but he did not toss him out on the ash heap. He was forgiven and became the greatest King Israel ever had. Peter denied that he knew Jesus, three times. But Christ did not throw him out of the disciples; he sent him off to build his Church at Rome.**

**Sometimes things go wrong. It happens, all the time. Sometimes there is a culprit; but sometimes nobody is to blame. Sometimes there is an imperfection in the clay itself. Sometimes, someone else gets in the way. But God does toss the broken clay away. He does not storm off into the wilderness and abandon us. If we allow it, God will help us to pick up the pieces, pat them together, and form it/us into something new, and better. It was true with individuals in the Bible; it is true with you; it is true with some people that you know. It can also be true with Churches. Relax, be patient. God is not finished with us yet. Our times are in the hands of God. By the Grace of God we came this far, and Grace will lead us home.**

**Now, if the clay on the wheel could talk, what a tale it would tell. "Hey, I'm getting dizzy spinning around on this darn old wheel. It hurts when the potter smushes down the clay and pounds me into a ball. It's no fun when the potter presses his fingers too hard against me. And it sure is hot in that kiln! I would just as soon not bother. Why don't you let me sit here on the table God, and watch you work on the others? I don't want to be a pot-sherd anyway." It is clear in the Bible that when it comes to human beings, free will and choices are involved, we have the power, the freedom and the choice to jump down off the wheel and ruin everything.**

**Be careful. God told Jeremiah that if the people of Israel refused to be re-shaped and did not submit to another spin on the wheel, he would plop them down and walk away. He said the day would come when all ears would tingle. Jeremiah 18:15f. says: "My people have forgotten me; they have wandered from the ancient roads; they have gone into the by-paths. They have gone their own way. They have stumbled. I remember how it used to be. What did I ever do? The Lord is asking, "that they turned their backs on me? If they do not repent and return to Me, I will turn my back and walk away! They will see my face no more." Ugh.**

**Isaiah 45 adds an interesting touch; it is almost funny. Almost. There Isaiah says “Woe to him who strives with his maker. Does the clay say to the potter, why are you making me this way?” Isaiah said some people say to the potter, “Hey, what’s up? I’d like to be something, someone else. I don’t like what you are doing to me. I want to have graceful handles, like that tall, slender cloisonné vase I see up on the mantle. I don’t want to be a little round mixing bowl. I don’t want to be a saucer!**

**St. Paul chimes in from the ninth chapter of his letter to the Romans: “Can the clay say to the potter: ‘Why did you make me this way? I want to be like Andrew or Sharon or John or Skip or Jennie or Randy. Wait a minute, St. Paul is speaking: “Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump a vessel of beauty and another for menial use? Who is in charge here?” The Lord needs all kinds of vessels to get the job done. Sometimes it is fine and fancy one, but you also need a cereal bowl, and a plain old jug, and a flat plate, and my dog needs two dishes: one for water, one for food? The same potter makes them all.**

**St. Paul is more specific in I Corinthians, Chapter 12. “There are a variety of gifts,” he writes, “the one body is made up of many members. Can the foot say to the hand, you do not belong to me? Can the ear say to the eye, because you cannot hear, you do not belong to the body?” No! Of course not! Even the unrepresentable parts are indispensable. Each and all are part of the same body of Jesus Christ. If you have a tooth ache or your back hurts or your head aches, your whole body shares in the suffering.**

**So it is, Paul writes, with the Church, which is the body of Christ. There are different gifts: some can teach, some heal, some prophesy, some are called to do everyday chores, some behind the scenes, some have only enough energy to pray; but the same God is the giver of all. There are different parts of the body, but they all share and travel together. If one member is honored all share in the honor; if one member suffers, we all suffer together. If one member leaves, it hurts everybody.**

### **III. The Question**

**I promised you a question: How and where do you think the message of Jeremiah applies in the world you know.**

**Just to start your thinking, it seems to me to apply to the United States of America. I get worried now and then that things are so mixed up and convoluted that we will never get them straightened out in time. The cauldron of the Middle East and the raging terrorists is bound to boil over. We have a lot of work to do**

**and love to invest in developing a world of peace and justice. Like the 7<sup>th</sup> Century Israelites, we have allowed our nation to drift off the high road into the by-paths of turpitude, or sin. We have forsaken the Word of the Lord. In too many places we hide the light of Christ under a bushel. And, some are hard at work, trying to draw us further away. I'll let you to fill in the details.**

**But, as Jeremiah said God said to the ancient Israelites, unless we repent and turn back to the Lord, we might force God to turn his back on us. "God is not mocked." Paul writes in Galatians 6, "Whatever a man, (a woman, a nation) sows, that they will also reap. Sow to the flesh and you will reap corruption; sow to the Spirit and you will reap eternal life." Plant corn and corn will come up. Plant cotton and cotton will grow. Plant weeds and they will take over the land.**

**Then, I think it also touches the heart of all those all around us, who need a word of comfort and courage. There are a lot of mysteries we have to contend with over the days and decades of our lives. This past week a 40 year old friend of ours died, leaving two children 11 and 14. Oh dear. You could add a hundred more. Why do these things happen to good people? I don't always know the answer, but I know where to start. I turn to Jeremiah and to Jesus Christ. It's tough I know, but my old friend Festus used to tell me, from his sick bed: "Until they have done to you what they did to Jesus, you have little reason to complain."**

**I know others who have made a mess of things, by their own doing or by the doing of others or by no-one-knows-why. If you are there, let me assure you that God is not finished with you yet. The Lord God is waiting to help you back up onto the wheel so you can start again. Do not give up on yourself; Christ never does!**

**Jeremiah says, it is like the clay on the potter's wheel....things go wrong as they often do, but whatever damage or difference happens to the clay, God does not discard it. He will pick it up and reshape it "as seems good to the potter to do." And, even if it does not happen the way you want it to in this mortal life, God will explain it and reshape it in the life in Jesus Christ that never ends. You will get back the years that the locusts have eaten. God bless you who bear special burdens. You are not alone. If you cannot live up to the person you want to be, be patient. In God's good time, it will all fit together.**

**And, sometimes it applies to Churches. For one reason or another, sometimes things do not work out. It does not matter why. It might be good to know so the same mistake will not be repeated again. But now and again the clay is twisted in the beginning, sometimes it dries up, sometimes strange things happen to it along the way, but the potter does not throw it away: he/she picks it up with loving care and reshapes it into something grand and gloriously new. You can count on it.**

**Only God can change a heart, but a heart can be changed. That's why we are here. Relax and watch what God can do. God is the potter, we are the clay.**

### **Conclusion**

**I also promised you a story. I hope it will make you smile. I have a dog, a West-Highland-terrier named Egg-Nogg-The-Dogg, all double "Gs". Egg Nogg is a piece of work. For one thing he runs our house and he knows it, a real Alpha dog. And as a Scottish terrier growing older, he wants his own way. He is a male dog after all. And, is he ever stubborn. My wife says she knows where he gets it. Her husband is Scottish too.**

**Well, I took Egg Nogg to the dog-groomer just before Christmas, so he would look nice when people come to watch him strut around the house. The groomer had told me that she would be finished by 12:30, but when I arrived Egg Nogg was not done. So the groomer invited me to watch as she finished the job. She was trying to make him look like a proper Westie. But oh dear, he resisted her every move. When she wanted him to hold his chin up, he jammed it down on his chest. When she tried to clip some hair off his ears, he shook his head vigorously. When she tried to clip his toe nails, he tucked his feet under his body. I was no help. He kept looking to me to get him out of this mess. The groomer finally suggested I wait out in the lobby.**

**Well, don't you know, in a little while, out the groomer came with Egg Nogg following on his bright red leash. And did he ever look natty as he pranced across the floor, as if he owned the whole wide world. Westies love to strut! I don't know what the groomer had done to get him to comply with her wishes. I never heard him growl. But it worked, even on a stubborn old dog. He looked just like a proud old Westie should; and he knew it too.**

**Did you get it? We drifted a long way from Jeremiah, but the message is the same. There is the potter and there is the clay. Christ will see you through, for now and forever more. Amen.**