

“Trusting the Potter”
Jeremiah 18:1-11

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I visited a pottery studio this summer at St. John’s University in Minnesota. While I was there, I did not learn how to make pottery and I was not invited to sit at a potter’s wheel, but I was offered a cup of tea and some cookies. At Saint John’s Pottery, offering hospitality is as important as learning to throw pots. In this studio’s extensive apprentice program, part of what their students learn is to brew tea at the *irori* table and take turns welcoming guests who have an open invitation to stop by every day at 3pm.

When you walk into the potty studio, in the front center of the room is a large *irori*, a traditional Japanese hearth and table used for heating tea water and food. There is a fire in the center of the table and a kettle hangs above it on an iron hook. Surrounding the fire is sand, then a stone ledge that folks can pull chairs up to and rest their cup and plate on.

The potter fills the kettle with tea water, wait for it heat to the right temperature, and then they pour the tea water into waiting cups. Instead of filling one cup fully and serving one person, they pour into as many cups as they need for the people gathered around the table with a small portion of the water so that each cup can begin to warm. Then they fill the kettle with more tea water, heat it over the fire, and portion it into each cup again, repeating until each cup has enough tea to serve all at once. Their motto is the Benedictine rule, “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself would say: I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

I share this because when we evoke the metaphor of God as a potter, it is important to understand not just the art of throwing pots or shaping bowls, but to understand the potter’s

house - to step inside and see where the potter works, to sit at the table of hospitality where all guests are welcomed and fed generously without rush, where tending to the tea water and ensuring that there is enough for everyone, that no one is left out, is of utmost importance. In the potter's house, guests would be served cups of hot tea in cups made by the potter with care, blurring the lines between art and practical use in service to the guests.

The prophet Jeremiah takes us to the potter's house, but it must be on a day when no guests show up for tea time. God is at the pottery wheel, clay in hand, and God is frustrated. The bowl they were shaping on the wheel has collapsed. The work they had carefully prepared and molded was now spoiled. Mistakes were made.

In pottery, when you make a mistake, there are a few situations when you can quickly fix it and keep moving forward, but it is much more common to have to start over again from the beginning, learning from what happened before and changing your process so that it doesn't happen again. This might be the nature of pottery that a potter must accept, but anyone who has undertaken an art that involves getting rid of what you've done and starting again knows how incredibly frustrating it is. A knitted scarf that must have rows removed because of missed stitches. A quilt that must be disassembled because the fabric is puckered. A loaf of bread that didn't rise and needs to be made from scratch again. A canvas where the paint has over mixed the rainbow of colors to become a murky, muddy blob that must be discarded. Going back to the beginning is enough to make you want to throw down what you've been working on, cast it aside, and vow to give up forever.

God is similarly frustrated. The care and craft they have put into the clay has been destroyed. It is spoiled and God is angry. It can be uncomfortable to think about a frustrated, angry God. We like our God happy, if not distant, a beloved creator that offers us hope and

peace. When we make mistakes or cause harm, we long for a God who picks us up, brushes us off, assures us that all will be well, and points us down the path to all things good and pleasant.

But Jeremiah, a prophet who doesn't speak of individual choices or accidental misdeeds but instead speaks out against systemic injustice and violence, knows that just as God can be tender in creation, God can be angry and upset when that creation causes harm to itself.

Personally, I am glad to hear about an angry God. I need a more powerful force than myself to show outrage when it feels like no one else cares.

When 150,000 residents of Jackson, Mississippi are without safe drinking water with no end in sight, I need someone to get angry instead of turning away or offering thoughts and prayers. When over 1,200 people in Pakistan have died due to catastrophic flooding, I need someone to weep with rage instead of saying, "Oh, that's too bad." When climate change wreaks havoc on our world I need someone to demand change instead of brashly continuing destructive practices and wasting energy by pointing fingers away from ourselves.

When faced with injustice that severs us from our humanity and tears apart creation, I need someone to care. I need someone to care so much that we start paying attention and do something about it or call into accountability those who have the power to make swift changes.

If God doesn't get angry, who will? Not the politicians. They will show up at our rallies, applaud our passion and make promises that unravel behind closed doors. Not the CEOs of corporations. They will invest in financial growth and global takeovers before investing in global transformation toward the care of all people.

Jeremiah explains that God has worked with the clay, tended it, done all the things that it needs to become its desired shape, and still it is spoiled. Jeremiah relays the string of curse words and threats that God utters in a moment of total frustration. The threats sound scarier because we

think of God's power and what might happen if the threats become reality. We focus on our fear instead of listening to what God is saying beneath the anger. But when we listen closely, what do we hear?

What does the potter long for the clay? What are they trying to craft? What does God long for humanity? What are they calling us to pay attention to? What wrongs do we need to right? What injustices are we being asked to transform? Beneath the fear of "what if God really blows a gasket" Jeremiah asks us to hear the words behind the anger, the hopes that have been uttered with care so many times before and gone unheard, that are now being sputtered out in frustration. God is saying, "Turn away from evil. Listen to my voice that calls you back to loving kindness and care for each other. Amend your ways and doings."

When figuring out if I should be afraid of an angry God or try to listen to the pain that is underneath the anger, I go back to the potter's house that Jeremiah describes. There, God is frustrated and angry, tired of shaping and reshaping the same lump of clay, but God does not give up. God does not walk away from the pottery wheel or put the clay on the shelf to dry out. God keeps working. God remains in the potter's house, at the wheel, working through the frustration and anger to draw us toward change, to form us into the beautiful, precious, piece of art she knows we can be. God stays at the wheel, not to destroy, but to reshape.

Perhaps this, too, is our call - to not give up on each other, to not cry and wail about injustice and then walk away from it, but to stay, to work, to commit to reshaping through the frustrations, through the setbacks, through the anger. To tell each other what it is we care about, what makes our frustration boil over, and to collaborate together to do something about it. Perhaps our collective call is to amend our ways and doings, again and again, and again.