

Still on the Wheel  
Jeremiah 18:1-12  
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Preached September 8, 2013 at San José, Costa Rica

Last Sunday's Scripture reading from the book of Hebrews included the famous phrase, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow," surely meant to provide a comforting sense of the permanence and stability of God. We wouldn't want our God as changeable as the weather. We don't want a God who gives into peer pressure. We want our God as unyielding as an iron bar, as strong as an impenetrable shield. We want a God who never sleeps, who never takes a vacation, who is always vigilant on our behalf. Yes, we'll take our Jesus Christ, "the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow," thank you very much. Unless of course, we want to get away with something. Then we start hoping God is blind in one eye, or busy with other matters of great importance. Then we start looking for the loopholes in the law, to see how we can turn that inch of pleasure into a mile of sin. Then we start trying to negotiate with God, to strike the best deal for our escape from the consequences. Then we start to interpret our great doctrines of God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness as broadly as possible, and hope that God is feeling a little more generous now than in the good old days. Maybe Jesus Christ, "the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow," can take a day off when our day of reckoning comes around. No such luck, says the prophet Jeremiah. God is in control of the affairs of this world like a potter's hands on a lump of clay.

But what if that statement has less to do with God's permanence, and more to do with God's nature? What if it has more to do with the divine attributes of compassion, justice, and grace than an unbending will? While both the rest of the book of Jeremiah, and the historical record, reveal that God wasn't kidding about bringing judgment and condemnation on the chosen people of Judah and Jerusalem, for they did indeed fall to those crazy Babylonians, this chapter of the book of Jeremiah, and the historical record reveal that God isn't the open and shut book the destruction of Jerusalem might suggest. Yes, God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow when dealing strictly with sin, but God is also the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, with giving us second, and third, and fourth, and fifth chances. God may be forever tired of our shenanigans, but God isn't finished with us yet.

This eighteenth chapter of Jeremiah presents us with the contrasting, but not contradicting, images of the God who is in complete control but who is willing to listen, and even to change the divine mind. "Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done?" says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it." "I will change my mind," says the Lord. It is not, of course, that God will relent as easily as

parents might do when a child's tears begin or when the begging wears too long on the nerves. Neither is God convinced by human logic or shown to be in error. Rather, it is that when there is true repentance, God will recognize that and take it into account. This chapter of Jeremiah doesn't use the word repentance; instead it speaks of "turning from evil" but that is what repentance really is. Repentance is not the same as feeling sorry for what you have done. Repentance is both the commitment to, and the follow through on, not doing it again, to cease and desist the behavior which has caused God to cry foul. If you are looking for a word that describes that feeling of being remorseful of your behavior, try the word contrition. But just remember that although God may love a contrite heart, what changes God's mind is the turning away from evil, the taking of a different path.

I said a little earlier that the historical record suggests both God's willingness to execute judgment, but also to change the divine mind. Yes, Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians because the people said, in their infinite stubbornness, "It is no use! We will follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will." But it is also true that God not only allowed, but facilitated their return to the promised land. The master potter used not only the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar to execute judgment, but later the Persian King Cyrus to bring the exiles home.

All of that was, of course, a very long time ago, both in years and culture. We no longer live in theocracies that see themselves subject to God's laws. We

generally elect our leaders not on the basis of their willingness to do as God tells them, but rather to uphold the constitutions of our nations. We don't generally think that our God is the God of only our country, but rather of the whole world. And we haven't had any prophetic judgments against our nations, although some people have interpreted calamities in such a way. It is an open question whether we are more or less sinful now, as nations or individuals, than in Jeremiah's time. And it's an open question whether God would tear down a whole nation in the same ways as in Biblical time. Even though God dangled out the possibility of a different fate for Jerusalem, if they had repented, its fate was sealed. But ours, it would seem, is not, at least not yet. Indeed, the value of Jeremiah's words is not really for those who first heard them, but for future generations, so that we might not make the same mistake. It is a cautionary tale. Let us heed it, just in case God is truly the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, in the more rigid sense.

As always, no metaphor is perfect. What can clay do to either sin or repent? It is just clay, without any capacity to change its properties or its abilities. Can it be something other than clay? Can it become a pot by itself? Of course not, but Jeremiah gives us a nice, concrete image to work with, for ourselves and for our nations. One author suggests that the clay's job is to remain centered on the potter's wheel. If you remember how a potter forms a pot, you'll remember that a lump of clay is placed on a spinning wheel, and formed as it goes around and around. If the pot begins with uncentered clay, that is, if it is closer to one side of

the wheel than the other, it will always fail spectacularly, indeed it will sometime collapse without any help at all from the unsatisfied potter. Thus, our call is to remain centered in God, balanced, straying neither too far from the right or the left. From that proper starting point, God can make a good, strong useful vessel. If the pot collapses, or the potter doesn't like the way the project is turning out, as Jeremiah witnessed, the potter may simply push the clay down into a lump once again and begin anew. And so we see that another aspect of potter's clay is that it is reworkable as long as it stays wet enough, which might suggest our job is to seek water, for Christians the living water of Jesus Christ, to keep ourselves in a workable condition so that God can continue to work and shape us. Once it dries out, or once it is put into the kiln, the clay hardens into an unworkable object that cannot be refashioned, and is only suitable for the rubbish heap.

But here is the good news of the Gospel, and the true beauty of the sameness of Jesus Christ yesterday, today, and tomorrow: that the potter is still at work, that we are still on the wheel. The clay has not been cast to the ground, and another lump placed on the wheel. Rather, it is continually pushed back down into a lump and worked and reworked into its final, perfected form. You see, what is changeless about God is God's desire for our perfection, our completion, our beauty, our strength, our fulfilled purpose. If that's the case, I'll take a stubborn God every day of the week and twice on Sunday. If that's the case, I'll keep trying to stay centered, keep trying to stay wet, so that God can keep working on me. If

that's the case, I'll do my best to turn away from evil, and amend my ways and my doings. And through all of that, I will remain grateful that though I am stubborn clay, the potter is yet more stubborn, and will keep working on me.

No metaphor is perfect. Maybe it is my stubbornness that won't let me interpret events like the Holocaust or 9/11 or AIDS or genocide or nerve gas attacks as God pushing down the clay and reworking the pot again, and I hope God will forgive me if I'm wrong about that. Maybe it is my overly generous view of God's goodness that won't allow me to see the death of a child or the loss of a home to a fire or a rape as God's way of either punishing bad behavior or making someone a better person through it, and I hope God will forgive me if I am wrong about that. I guess I want it both ways. I don't really have a good answer for those who feel like they've been pushed back down on the wheel more than their fair share of times. I wish the process of God's reshaping of us wasn't the painful experience it often is. You'll never hear me say, "What doesn't kill you will make you stronger," or "It was God's will," because I don't have any idea if that is true.

But here is what I know is true, from both the book of Jeremiah and the historical record: that God is more interested in creating beautiful and useful vessels than in exacting revenge because the divine pride got bruised. Nowhere in Scripture do we see God rejoicing in starting over. Rather, the purpose of reworking the clay is so that the clay may become all God desires it to be. Do you really want a God who would let you turn out less than you could be, even if it

meant your life wasn't as easy as you might have wished? And do you know that your God is a potter who allowed even divine clay to be pushed down and refashioned. Yes, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, but he too endured being reworked by the potter's hand, to be all God meant him to be, for us, and for the whole world. May we give thanks that God is infinitely creative, wonderfully patient, perpetually unchanging in both desiring righteousness and helping us to be righteous, and always willing to give keep working on us. Amen.