

Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost
The Rev. John Crosswaite

Hom – Proper 18, September 4th 2022

Back in the 60's I attended an all-boys Catholic High School that was labeled as "college preparatory." It emphasized the learning of languages (Latin, Greek, German, French, Polish), mathematics, some science like chemistry and physics, history, speech and debate, English literature, and writing. We had something of music appreciation but no broader art courses. So it was in college a friend introduced me to pottery.

I never had an inkling back then of how anyone did pottery. There was an "up and coming potterer," who set up shop in a back alley in downtown Milwaukee; he was slowly making a name for himself. His shop was behind and below a better known German sausage maker (Usinger's Sausage)... Jack and I had to go down one back alley and then another... down some steps to Abe Cohn's little shop called "the Potter's Wheel."

Abe had immigrated with his father after WWII to Wisconsin. The shop was very primitive and dusty. As you entered there was a small display area to the left with a few pots for sale and to the right were a number of potter wheels where Abe would work the clay in forming some great pieces of pottery. In the back of the open basement were some rough shelving for unfinished pots, a kiln, and storage for some mixtures for glazes.

Abe was friendly and welcoming... wanting to introduce his passion and art form to any who would come. Abe and his wife had established a summer school or internship up in the Door County area of Wisconsin (that thumb-like peninsula that jots out into Lake Michigan.)

And the school of pottery is still going to this day, though Abe died; but the legacy helping other potters get their start, hone the gift and passion was part of his overall contribution.

That meeting of Abe started my liking of pottery. Not that I know a lot about it, but am fascinated by the process... the molding of the clay, the drying, the glazing and firing in the kiln, and then being surprised at what gets created... there seems to be very few controls in how exactly a pot may turn out.

About ten years ago a friend gave me a three-hour class on throwing clay and pots. I was in a beginner's group so none of us really knew what we were doing and yet I began to have a greater appreciation of the touch it took to center the clay... keeping it moist... not to have too thin of walls – not to saying anything about the drying process and mixing the colors before placing the pots in the kiln. That has been my limited exposure but always have been drawn to potters and it all started in that back-alley way in a small roughhewn basement shop in downtown Milwaukee.

The prophet Jeremiah lived and prophesized around 600 BCE – during the last years of the southern kingdom of Judah and the first years of Judah's exile into captivity. He says, "The

Word of the Lord came to me..." those words resemble other prophetic formulas... such as "Then the word of God came to me or Thus says the Lord."

But before the Lord would let Jeremiah hear and speak God's Word, The Lord commanded him to come and literally – rise up and then "go down" to the lower elevation of the potter's house/shop... down another back alley and observe the potter and his craft. It was then that Jeremiah would be able to speak God's Word... then Jeremiah would be able to know something of God's word as he went about observing the clay being formed and shaped on the wheel to become something.

Jeremiah may have wondered why he had to go out of his way for "this word of God," since God could have been comfortable revealing God's Word to Jeremiah in his easy chair or recliner or by watching the discovery channel. But Jeremiah listened deeply to God and went to the potter's house and observed the potter's work-passion-skill-mistakes and because of that, Jeremiah came to understand more profoundly what God would say.

And so we have this understanding, thanks to his time of observation...

Potter is the noun that comes from the Hebrew verb "yatsar," which means to fashion, to form, to shape, to create. It also can mean to frame, pre-ordain, and plan. The book of Genesis has God forming man from the dust of the ground/the clay of the earth. Earlier we heard the words spoken to Jeremiah and Isaiah, "Before I FORMED you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born, I consecrated you."

Jeremiah's potter was working at his wheel with its two stones... the one stone at the potters foot kept the larger stone moving and the clay being formed.

He watched the potter and saw that the vessel the potter was making was spoiled; but rather than throwing out the clay, he reworked it into another item. This was not simply a tweaking or touch up... but a complete makeover or do-over.

Then the word of God came to Jeremiah... like the potter, God can recast the divine destiny of nations, including Israel or Judah. "Can I not do with you house of Israel, just as this potter has done? Just as the clay is in the potter's hands, so are you in my hands, O house of Israel."

God's intentions and actions may seem arbitrary (God can do anything he chooses to do with his own clay.) But if a nation turns from evil ways, God says "God will change God's mind about the disaster God had in mind."

There are two small observations I would like to make concerning our reading this day...

First, as Jeremiah could not effectively prophesize and understand God's Word for Judah and for himself without his going and observing the potter. There are times I believe we don't get God's Word for us unless we allow God to lead us so that we can observe God's Word and listen; maybe down some back-alley way, away from what we know and are comfortable with, to take

in God's Word. Our resistance to God can be strong -- to truly hearing what it is God wants to say to us -- what God wants us to know "about ourselves and our world and our the culture we place so much value in and even our church."

Are there places God has led you before you became more aware of a sense of what you must do with your life and the good you are invited to accomplish?

I know one of the places God has led me over the years was at the bed of someone who was dying. Now many people might think physicians and clergy are somewhat immune and are pretty comfortable with the dying... yet that is not the case. That had been the case for me as well. Until I simply took the time --- not rushing --- but being with the person dying, holding their hand, quietly praying, talking to them -- even if they cannot talk back, staying around with anxious family members. That action opened for me God's Word in a different way.

Maybe it is not rushing a visit with an elderly person... but staying there and listening and learning and observing and making sure that person knows they are the most important person in your life at the moment. Like Jeremiah we might have to step out of our comfort to hear God again and to know something true about ourselves.

The other observation for our thoughts is "are we the vessel God intended?" Have we allowed ourselves the awareness that as a potterer takes skill and passion to make something... a vase, a jar, a coffee mug, a plate... not exactly knowing how the finish product will turn out due to the glaze and firing of the kiln --- have we been aware that we are God's vessels?

"Before we were born, God knew us" so today's psalmist prays. Our life's purpose and the potential for good is always before us. Do we appreciate the forming of our goodness so long ago and how God wants us to be the best we can be and the truest we can be as we grow and age.

You might say that these questions are too simple and most pots are too fragile.

Are there any back-alley ways God is directing us so we might hear God's Word for us more clearly?

Appreciating the form of a vessel we have become, is it what God intended or is there a way, like Judah, to return to what God is hoping for with us all? Can we allow God even at this time of our lives to form us into what God may desire?

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Let me close with this prayer written by John O'Donohue

We give thanks for arriving safely in this new dawn;

For the gift of eyes to see the world;

The gift of mind to feel at home in our lives.

The waves of possibility breaking on the shore of dawn,

The harvest of the past that awaits our hunger and all the furthering this day may bring...

Let us hear your word for us. Let us hear you!

The Rev'd John Crosswaite