

Shaped by God – Jeremiah 18:1-11

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The only time I've been in front of a potter shaping clay at her wheel was when I was a kid in school. I distinctly remember a big lump of clay the art teacher would place on the wheel and, using water and some tools, she would slowly begin to shape it as the wheel spun.

The gray clay, the water slowly added, the dirty hands of the potter—all worked together to slowly create something amazing out of a ball of clay that began without any shape or hint of beauty.

As kids in art class, we would shape our own clay into pots or other objects. But we did it with our own hands. There was no spinning wheel to do the work for us. And it showed. After those creations were thrown in the kiln, they'd come back to us ready for us to paint them and glaze them into something more refined.

And I remember looking at mine and at some of my classmates with my head half-cocked and wondering what they were intended to be. But, they were beautiful in their own right, just minus the precision that an experienced potter and her wheel could employ.

God tells Jeremiah to go down to the potter's house, which sets the tone for a lesson on shaping and molding. At the potter's wheel, the potter shaped clay into something that seemed good to him.

And God uses the metaphor of the potter to send a message to the people of Israel through Jeremiah: I am shaping you, too.

But as it was and is through prophecy, the people God spoke to through Jeremiah had a say in the matter of who they would become. They could either be shaped into something amazingly beautiful by the potter. Or they could be destroyed like a potter smashing a ball of clay. Their behavior would dictate which product they would end up being.

This metaphor of God being the potter and us being the clay is often taken as a feel-good story. We have this picture in our minds of God continually shaping and shaping and shaping until this beautiful creation is finished. It's hopeful to think this, that God is never finished turning us

into something that will definitely be more mature and pleasing to God's eye.

Yet, God's words to Jeremiah remind us that we have a say in the matter: We have a say in what God ultimately makes of us. And it's a distinct possibility that the end result won't be something pretty. Based on the choices we as a people make regarding how we live faithfully or not, there's a chance God could bring disaster.

We don't enjoy hearing passages that produce fear or threats. We'd like to think that in this setting, the house of the Lord, there's only redemption. There's only grace. There's only a happy ending. We want to hear hope—that everything can be overcome by an all-loving God.

But God reminds us through Jeremiah that our decisions have an impact on what we ultimately become and what God ultimately makes us out to be. And our choices could lead to an ending we don't want to find.

Choices. We make them everyday. Some lead to the consequences we desire and some do not.

Speaking of choices, once upon a time a guy was tragically killed in an accident and reached the pearly gates and was greeted by St. Peter. He had worked in Human Resources his whole career. St. Peter said, "Well, we've never had an HR manager make it this far, and we're really not sure how to deal with you."

"Oh, I see," said the guy. "Could you just let me in?"

"Well, we have rules," St. Peter said. "You have to experience one day in hell and one day in heaven, and then you get to choose where you'll spend eternity." At that point, St. Peter put the HR manager into the downward bound elevator.

When the guy stepped off the elevator into hell, he was pleasantly surprised. There was a beautiful, well-manicured golf course. He got to see a whole bunch of his former colleagues and friends who warmly greeted him in their nice golfing attire. They played a perfect round of golf and then went to the country club dining room where he enjoyed a wonderful steak and lobster dinner.

He met the devil there, who actually was rather nice. They all enjoyed a wonderful night of laughter and telling stories. When it was

time to leave, everyone shook the guy's hand as he boarded the elevator for heaven, where St. Peter was waiting for him.

"Now it's time to spend a day in heaven," said St. Peter. So, the guy spent the next 24 hours lounging on the clouds, playing the harp and singing, which was almost as enjoyable as his day in hell. At the conclusion, St. Peter said, "Well, you've had a day in both places. Now it's your time to choose. Which one will it be, heaven or hell?"

The HR manager thought about it for a minute and said, "Well, as nice as heaven has been, I think I liked hell a little better. Let's go with that." So back down to hell he went.

When the doors to the elevator opened this time, however, it was a different scene. It was total desolation. There was garbage and filth everywhere. All those friends he had seen earlier were dressed in rags, picking up rubbish and putting it in old sacks.

"I don't get it," the HR manager said, "Last time, we played golf on this beautiful course, we dined on the best food, and people were dressed to the nines. There was laughter and fun everywhere. What happened?"

The devil came up next to him and said, "Yesterday, we were recruiting you. Today, you're staff."

(Anybody who's worked for an HR department or who's had to deal with one may have enjoyed that a little more than the rest.)

The moral of the story is that just because something looks good in the first few moments doesn't mean it's like that all the time. Choices must be made wisely.

And God gives us the ability to make choices that come with consequences—consequences that will lead either to being molded into something beautiful or something opposite.

There are a couple key concepts from this text that might help us in our quest to be molded into something greater than we are.

A word that appears repeatedly in this passage is "turn." God speaks of a nation that "turns from its evil" (v. 8) and calls for Israel to "Turn now, all of you from your evil way" (v. 11). God also says that "I will change my mind" about a nation that turns from its evil (v. 8), and "I will change my mind" about a nation that turns toward evil (v. 10). This language

of turning and changing is the language of molding and making. Nothing is fixed; everything is changing.

How are we turning? How are we changing to fit the mold we want to become? Are we turning away from evil or turning toward it?

Another term we could use—fitting for our tradition—is that of being reformed. We are children of the Reformation. We are part of a tradition that has in its history a period of deep reforming of Christian faith. And as we like to say, “We are reformed and always [or should be always] reforming.”

Committing ourselves to being reformed or reshaped according to what God would have us do doesn’t mean we compromise our principles or our long-lasting beliefs in what we think is right. Instead, it means changing our behavior to match the needs of today.

Being in touch with the populations that need to hear of the redemption that Jesus Christ offers, tailoring our message so that others can hear and comprehend it, and then choosing the right vehicles by which to share the message—these are all critically important if we are to turn in the right direction. Not toward evil but from it.

A second important concept we should embrace is a willingness to let the potter shape us. We should surrender ourselves to the God who desires to shape us into more faithful disciples.

Sometimes the only thing we can see about ourselves is the sorry state we’re in now. We appear to be so mangled, so out of sorts, so out of shape that we wonder how God can possibly mold us into something better.

God has the ability to do this if we’re willing to let him. Instead of fixating on the flaws of our past—the failed opportunities, the numerous times we have turned toward evil—we should believe the potter can purify us. God can take, as we know, the farthest-most wanderer and bring him or her home. Just like the prodigal son who wandered off, wasted his father’s inheritance, and was welcomed home with open arms, so does God welcomes us home, too—if we run to him. We must meet God at least halfway.

Don't stress about wrong turns you've made in the past; the potter can help you move in a new direction.

One of folk singer John Denver's many songs is titled, "The Potter's Wheel." Here's part of the lyric:

*The world is fast becoming younger, the news is all they've ever known.
They've seen the wars, the hurt, the hunger, how will they choose when they are
grown.*

What do you tell forever's children when it's their turn to hurt and heal?

Whatever spins a grim tornado can also turn a potter's wheel.

Take a little clay, put it on a wheel, get a little hint how God must feel.

Give a little turn, listen to it spin, make it into the shape you want it in.

God is the potter; we are the clay. Yet, we have a say in what that wheel will ultimately make. Let's allow God to shape us into what we want to be.