

“Like New Clay in the Potter’s Hands”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 13, 2015

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Holy Scriptures: Jeremiah 18: 1-11

The Potter and the Clay

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: ²“Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” ³ So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴ The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

⁵ Then the word of the Lord came to me: ⁶ 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. ⁷ At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸ 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. ⁹ And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰ but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. ¹¹ Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

Sermon

Orientation, Disorientation, Reorientation

Walter Brueggemann observes that the Psalms and other spiritual writings can be understood in terms of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation.

Our orientation

is that we are creations of God,
who loves us, forgives us, and makes us in God's
image.

We experience disorientation

whenever we feel or think of God as absent, or distant, or
uncaring;

or whenever we express regret or sorrow
over the wrongs we have done
or believe have been done to us.

Disorientation is unnerving, knocking us off balance and out of our
comfort zone.

We welcome reorientation

with shouts and prayers thanksgiving
for what God does to lead us out of being disoriented
and into a renewed sense of life and love.

At the core of reorientation

is the blessed reality of reconciliation, resurrection,
and the renewal of our relationships
with God and one another and our true sense
of self.

The pattern of orientation, disorientation and reorientation
is found in literature, both fiction and non-fiction alike.

- Oliver Sacks touched us with "Awakenings" and
"The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat"
- Charles Dickens' impoverished children with hearts of gold,
- Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne in The Scarlet Letter,
- Toni Morrison's protagonists in Sula and Song of Solomon,
- Tony Hillerman's fictional Tribal Policeman Chee and Lt.

Leaphorn,

- Stieg Larsson's quirky, brave Lisbeth Salander,
"The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo"

and just about every biography ever written
share this pattern of creation, unraveling, & renewal.

Whether reflected in the literature we enjoy
or in our bathroom mirror,
we have in common personal and communal experiences
of orientation, disorientation and reorientation.

Orientation

E. Claiborne Jones is an Episcopal priest in the Atlanta area.

Claiborne Jones spoke recently about a story she had read that
moved her.

"I read a story...about a little girl and her mother
who visited a sculptor's studio each day,
watching the artist carve a lion out of a huge block of
marble.

Finally, one day, the animal's figure was clear,
and the child recognized what it was.

She turned to her mother and said,

"Mom, how did that man know that there was a lion in
there?"

"As we, all of us, continue to grow and to flourish,
I hope that we will remember that it is, finally,
love alone which set us free.

Christ's love, offered to us through 4-year-olds and grandparents,
teachers, and friends, who have the courage to tell the truth.

Christ's love alone sets us free to be ourselves,
whether we are wealthy or poor, famous or unknown, not so
good or good."

Claiborne Jones went on to say,

"In my yearbook my senior year, a friend wrote:

'Claibby, remember how many of us love you just for being
you.'

Remember how many people love you, just for being
you."

Our orientation is good.

Like a divine sculptor, God made us in God's own image and was so happy, so proud, so delighted.

Like they say, your picture is on God's refrigerator door. God loves you just for being you. Our orientation is good.

Our orientation is that we are good, we are made real and blessed by the love of Christ. Christ's love abounds, and reverberates around us and through us, and this same love helps to keep us on track, focused, and justified. Our orientation is grounded in Creation and in the Covenant, and we live this out by following the will of God.

Disorientation

Jeremiah was called by God to address and challenge the faith community.

People were wandering away from their orientation.

They had become disoriented,

focusing on God's seeming absence rather than God's real presence.

"The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord:

"Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words."

So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel.

The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

Then the word of the Lord came to me:

"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." (Jeremiah 18: 1-6)

Let's draw strength from Jeremiah's reminder

that God is not afraid to change direction, change course, or

change her mind.

Be encouraged.

Let us not be afraid as well.

Be willing to be formed and re-formed by God the Potter.

Does being changed from glory into glory frighten you?

Sometimes it scares the heck out of me.

And that is okay.

Let's face our fears together, as a blessed community of faith.

What we do here today, in and through Christ,

 matters to you and me, to the city, the world,

 and especially to the One who Created and Creates.

Our actions have consequences

 in our relationships with one another and God.

Whether we want it to or not,

 our choices and deeds influence God's responses and actions.

The Good News is that God responds quickly to the choices we make.

Reorientation

God sent Jeremiah into the heart of the city to call the people

 to repent, to turn away from evil,

 and do what is pleasing in the sight of the Lord.

Whenever we repent, turn 180 degrees, change our ways, and re-
turn to the Lord,

then our lives are reoriented.

Claiborne Jones once offered a list of ten things to consider in life
and ministry,

including a word of encouragement to believe

in "authentic humanity as the place where resurrection takes place."

In other words, the human condition is the place where God chooses
to work miracles,

 where God's renewing power is made real,

 where God is working Her purpose out,

 where God changes lives and reshapes souls.

So, whenever you get disoriented,
 have faith that God is present, and will call you to re-turn and
return.

Express your disorientation with songs of lament and prayers of
confession.

A lament is a prayer or song in which we express
 anger, frustration, disappointment, or confusion
 about what seems like God's absence.

A prayer of penitence or confession
 is one in which we express regret and sorrow
 over wrongs we have done
 or believe have been done to us.

Offer laments and confessions with confidence,
 trusting that God the Potter, the Molder,
 the Shaper of lives and community,
 hears us, loves us, and will reorient us into a
new creation.

God through Jeremiah teaches us that the clay of our souls is an
active agent.

Orientation, disorientation and reorientation
are each a part of life, of growth, of being in community with one
another.

We start each day anew, with the theological grounding
 that we are like new clay in the Potter's hands.

We start each experience with the faith
 that we who are made good, in the image of God,
 are still being formed and reformed and transformed.

And then we move into the specifics
of God's molding and shaping our re-orientation, our vocare, our
calling:

"The place God calls you to

**is the place where your deep gladness
and the world's deep hunger meet." – Frederick
Buechner**

What makes you truly glad?

What makes you deeply happy when you do or
participate in this?

What deep hunger or hungers do you see in the world?

What are you thinking of when you say,
"Someone should do something about that"?

Where these two intersect, that is your vocation.

That is where God is calling you.

Everyone has a vocation.

How about you?

God empowers you to live and breathe

at the intersection of personal gladness and service above
self.

Your vocation may be full time or part time;

it may be your daily life or a hobby or a rare, occasional,
special experience.

Beware that if you only seek after that which makes you glad

and make no attempt to serve the greater good,
your life may become empty, lacking in depth,
fulfillment, and meaning.

Yet also be aware that if you only practice addressing the hungers
you see

and have no joy, no gladness, no thrill or happiness in the
effort,

then you run the risk of burn out & depression,
and may feel as if your efforts are in vain.

Let's be real here.

Did you ever learn from a teacher who did not like teaching?

Is anyone healed by a physician who doesn't want to be a doctor?

Is a soul transformed by a preacher who wishes he or she were not
in the pastorate?

Follow your joy and seek to make a difference.

Be flexible.

Your vocation may evolve and shift and change over time.

Be like new clay in the hands of the Potter.

Be open to be shaped and reshaped as the Lord has need of you.

Talk about changing vocations:

Your pastor went to clown school,

juggled for spare coins on the streets of Boston,

worked in a circus,

shaped balloon sculptures for kids

from coast to coast,

and then ran away from the

circus

to join the Church.

And the spark of my calling in 1985 to serve God's people in the local church

remains aglow and aflame to this day, for as far as I can see.

This morning Isaiah and Jeremiah and the Living Word of God

remind us that our Creator is not afraid

to change direction, change course, or change her mind.

Let us be encouraged.

Let our souls be supple and open to reorientation.

Let us be willing to be formed and re-formed by God the Potter.

The foundational conviction of our vocation

is that we are called, made with a purpose, and sent.

The time to serve is now;

the place is wherever God sends you to love.

We live in the midst of God's loving creation and re-creation of the human condition.

And if and when you become disoriented, discouraged, or dissed,
simply, prayerfully, gratefully...

"Remember how many of us love you just for being

you.

Remember how many people love you, just
for being you.”

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!