

Worship Series: Thriving Through Transitions

February 2 "Changes"

February 9 "Endings"

February 16 "Neutral Zones"

February 23 "Beginnings"

"Neutral Zones"

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Epiphany, Sunday, February 16, 2020

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Holy Scriptures: Jeremiah 18: 1-11 Ephesians 2: 1-10

Resource: Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes, by William Bridges, 1980.

Jeremiah 18:1-11

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." ³So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴The 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.

⁵Then the word of the Lord came to me: ⁶Can 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. ⁷At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸but 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. ⁹And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰but 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. ¹¹Now, 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.

Ephesians 2:1-10

You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Sermon

The Clay of Our Souls

"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)*

The Prophet Jeremiah reminds us

that God is not afraid to change direction, change course, or change God's mind.

Let us not be afraid as well.

Be encouraged.

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

The clay of our souls is an active agent.

We are not passive,

nor are we ever so hardened that we cannot be transformed.

Come into the presence of the Lord, one and all,
and know that God lovingly seeks to rework you
and the whole people of Jesus Christ

into another vessel, as seems good to God.

The clay of our souls is an active agent.

As we go through the phases and rephrasing of our lives, be malleable.

Trust that the Lord is with you in the betwixt and between places,

with you in the limbo moments of your journey,

with you as you do the inner soul-searching to help you to thrive,
to thrive as you transition into the dream God has for you.

The Clay of Our Souls

Our own beloved Mary Frances Early was the first African American graduate of the University of Georgia in Athens, enrolling in 1961 to earn a master's degree there. She was harassed and called everything but a child of God. Once some students threw rocks at her. She picked one up and threw it back. She went on to graduate with a Masters in Music Education. Mary Frances Early has served Christ here in the Choir and Bell Choir. She fulfilled terms as a Deacon, Elder, Moderator, and Church Trustee. On February 25, 2020, she'll be honored when the UGA Education Building is named after her. Various groups at UGA invite her to return to share her story. Mary Frances Early has spoken to groups ranging from thirty students to 1,000, from elementary schools to the entire UGA commencement. She's been honored and thanked for the significance of her brave accomplishment, as well she should be.

She has shared that one of her speaking engagements stands out for what happened afterward.

In 2009, a faith-based group in Athens invited her to address them. She was tired and didn't feel like going. She went anyway. She shared her experiences from the early 1960s and afterward. The next day she got an email from a student. He said that while she was talking to the faith-based group, he discovered that he was sitting beside the 1961 president of UGA's student body. Mary Frances Early wrote an email back, asking, "*Has he changed?*" The student replied, "*No.*" Two score and 19 years later, one of our neighbors is stuck in 1961!

The Clay of Our Souls

We tend to think that our stubbornness speaks to the power of the Gospel. Whereas it is much more likely that the power of the Gospel addresses our stubbornness. Sometimes change comes when we make a choice to leave our fear of scarcity behind, and live into the abundance of God's love and grace. Sometimes change comes when we are forced to make a choice.

Sometimes change comes in the midst of transitions and upheavals,
disruption and confusion.

We like to think that faith in Jesus Christ saves us from chaos,
suppresses disruption and obliterates misunderstanding.

Au contraire!

Faith in Jesus Christ is our comfort, our protection, our blessing, our redeeming grace.
Faith in Jesus Christ empowers us to cope with life's challenges.

The Good News is that the abundant grace of God enables us to trust,
to trust that God is with us,
to trust that God is present in times of transition,
periods of change, and experiences that stretch us.

The Clay of Our Souls

We are only clay in the Potter's hand
if/when we allow ourselves to be shaped and reshaped, formed and reformed,
to die and be resurrected anew, today and every day.
One of the hindrances to being shaped and reshaped
is our fear or apprehension of what happens,
what goes on
in the process of being rewritten, reoriented, reborn again.

We may deny or become overwhelmed by the experience known as neutral zones.
To deny what God can do in us and through us
as we go through periods of disorientation and reorientation
is to lose what could be a deepened sense of purpose.
To be overwhelmed
is to give in to not allowing this process of rediscovery
to be integrated into the remainder of our life.

Instead, my friends,
seek to welcome and recognize that the Holy One is with you.
If it's scary, God is nigh to hold you.
If it's mucky, Jesus turns mud into new vision.
If it's too darn much to handle, it probably is --
so tithe your burdens to God every time you take Holy Communion.
Over time, over here at the Lord's Table,
may your burdens become lighter and your back stronger.

Surrender yourself to God.
Give in to the emptiness of the neutral zone.
Rather than seeking to stop or escape from it, turn yourself over to the process.
Welcome what may be opening up in front of you.

The Clay of Our Souls

One of my brothers was given a rare and generous grant
to attend a year of seminary, free, anywhere in the USA.
David Calvert graduated from college in May 1975;
the world was wide open before him.
The seminary study grant came with no strings attached.
If, after one year, he chose to stay,
he could pursue the Master of Divinity degree.
If not, keep calm and carry on.
As we say on the basketball court, no harm, no foul.
So, David attended classes and served in the community,
made friends and wrote lots of papers.
That year he preached at our home church, the Church of the Living Hope.
When he said from the pulpit that Jesus of Nazareth was loving, prophetic, Divine,
yet not a perfect human being,
this 15-year-old little brother in the pews
looked to see whether the ground below the pulpit
was opening to swallow him whole.
So, after a year of study, David was torn.
Should he stay or should he go?
He made an appointment and sat down with his academic advisor,
a professor he trusted.
After pouring out his heart,
David listened to the professor's counsel.
"When you walk out this door," he said,
"spend the next three days with one option.
See how it feels. How does it wear on you?
Then, for the three days after that, live with the other option.
See how it feels. How does it wear on you? After 6 days, you will know."

David shares that he walked out the office door with pep in his step,
bound and determined to stay in seminary, to pursue being a minister.
He lived with the option for three days.
He prayed, shared with family and friends, slept on it.
Then, for the next three days,
he considered his life without a seminary degree,
and explored other options before him.
He prayed, shared with family and friends, slept on it.
He walked with God and God's people in what we call a neutral zone.
By the end of the 6th day, he knew.
He emerged transformed, stepping out on the other side with clarity and direction.
The answer he sought was clear;

he was content, and the Spirit of the Lord was upon him.
David chose to cease his seminary education,
taking with him what he had learned,
and to serve God in the community.
In due time, the Spirit led him to empowering young people
in barrios and slums and inner cities to renovate homes and build up their lives
from NYC to Mexico City to Honduras and back again.

The Clay of Our Souls

Fear not neutral zones.
Walk in with God and God's people, and you will be blessed.
The "neutral zone is meant to be a moratorium
from the conventional activity
of our everyday experience." (Bridges, P. 114)
An intentional time-out to evaluate, assess, explore,
meditate, contemplate, take a step back to process,
this can be a good thing, a good time, a good transition.
You can enter a neutral zone by taking yourself away from all this,
going on retreat, getting away from it all,
stopping the normal daily activities.
There is something to be said for this.
A fresh scenery can help with a fresh outlook.

You can also, my friends, be in an intentional neutral zone,
reworking your soul from the inside out,
while you are going to work every day,
making the morning coffee,
studying the cracks in the plaster on the wall,
daydreaming, waiting and watching and wondering,
practicing "attentive inactivity and ritualized routine." (Bridges, p. 114)

What matters most,
whether going deep into your soul while on a retreat
to get a sense of perspective,
or going deep into your soul while in the everyday,
what matters most
is that when you are in a neutral zone,
heighten your awareness.
Use all your senses to prepare yourself to "see and understand the world differently
in the gap between one life phase and the next."

The Clay of Our Souls

Let's pause to acknowledge that the gap, the neutral zone,
may be an experience we seek out and create,
or, it can feel like it's happening to you,
maybe even against your will, not anything you planned or
wanted.

Yesterday we hosted a lovely memorial service for the Rev. Adei
Grenpastures.

Almost exactly 22 years ago, the Rev. Adei Grenpastures
was badly hurt in a car accident.

Her hospital stay was long, arduous, painful.

Hers was a period of transition she never wanted nor asked for,
yet she handled it with courage and grace,

trusting her canes and walkers, her friends and Lord and Savior.

Sometime later, after she was released from the hospital,
she shared with her church about the day

she saw Minnie Haynes, Millie Suttles and Frances Shumake

striding down the hospital hallway toward her bedside.

Adei Grenpastures said she knew in a heartbeat that the 3 prayer warriors
were there to connect her with God's healing power.

"Knowing their joy and prayer life," she said,

"neither broken bones nor the devil stood a chance."

God is with you in the gaps, in the between places we find ourselves.

Like footprints in the sand, God is lifting you up in tough and contemplative times.

God sends in the troops, the prayer warriors, to carry the Word:

Good News!

The Potter is reshaping the clay of our souls.

Be malleable, flexible, supple,

even – and especially -- when the zone you enter is replete with upheaval.

Many of us discover we are going through periods
of disorientation and disenchantment,
disidentification and disengagement.

We've lost our way, lost our joy,

lost our sense of self, lost our communal connections.

Intending to cross the street,

we stepped off a curb,

leaving behind the familiar.

Yet suddenly we find our self in a zone, sometimes a lostness,

and here we are, stuck, stuck in the middle, sitting here in limbo,

not sure how to get across the street to the curb waaaay over there.

The Clay of Our Souls

Be not afraid.

God is with you.

God loves you, and we do, too.

The hope, the goal, the gift is

to "see and understand the world differently

in the gap between one life phase and the next." (P. 117)

While coping in a neutral zone with God,

the spiritual disciplines are at your disposal.

Work what works for you.

Take a risk, try something new.

Fast.

Pray.

Keep a journal.

Cultivate receptivity.

Walk boldly into emptiness.

Be silent.

Sing spiritual songs and the Psalms.

Dance to the music.

Walk a labyrinth.

Connect with a spiritual guide.

Let God-the-Potter tell you how to reshape you.

Jesus suggested feet washing.

Wash someone's feet. Allow someone to wash your feet.

The Clay of Our Souls

A beloved Disciples Elder told me that

whenever she felt sorry for herself and her dying body,

a neutral zone of transition she explored with a deepening spirituality,

she got up to serve somebody.

Tutoring children to read, she said,

freed her from a self-pity party in her disorientation,

while at the same time serving someone else

enabled her to better glean God's will for her life in transition.

Part of her coping in her neutral zone was telling her story.

Tell your story.

Share.

Speak.

Write.

Tell God all about it.

Tell a friend.

Tell a neighbor.

Tell a stranger, who will then become a neighbor, then a friend.

A short while back a representative group from this significant congregation
traveled east to the University of Georgia campus in Athens.

We were there to experience the Mary Frances Early Lecture Series,
given in honor of the first African American graduate from UGA.

That lovely April Tuesday I was the designated driver.

I dropped off a carload of church members at the campus chapel
for the lecture and reception.

I headed off to find a parking space.

However, while walking back from the parking deck on the UGA campus
I got completely and utterly turned around.

I was in a zone, alright, a zone of confusion.

A gentleman in a blazer passed by.

"Excuse me, sir," I said. *"I am so lost.*

Would you please point me toward the church?"

Without saying a word,

he reached into his blazer jacket pocket,

pulled out a Gideon's Bible,

and handed it to me.

True story.

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