

**Clay**  
**September 5, 2010**  
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**Westhampton Congregational United Church of Christ**

One of my favorite hobbies growing up was making all sorts of fantastical creatures out of modeling clay. Right up into college I used clay to express my imagination. I kept the tray of my creations in the closet off the playroom. They changed regularly, but one thing was always true. They always looked like a strange collision of a toy factory, Star Trek® and fairy tales. Bits of a space alien joined with a swashbuckler to make one creature; Puss 'n' boots joined with a super hero to make the next.

My interest in clay became a little more formal when I went to Simon's Rock Early College. I took a class in ceramics, and tried my hand at a potter's wheel. I didn't love it. I found it a little confining. So, I returned to making clay things in a more freestyle way. By then, the landscape of my imagination had shifted. Instead of space swashbucklers and superhero cats I made even stranger art. Many were religious figures. There was even a crucifix or two. Some things were more like relics or landscapes retrieved from dreams. I kept making and remaking the stuff of my life in clay: forming possibilities, trying new things, revisiting enduring themes, and slowly shaping a future.

My ceramic teacher at Simon's Rock was named Jane Palmer. She had a memorable voice—part whisper, part squeak, and all *odd*. Because of that, she could turn any expression into a life memory. She might say, “We gotta do these glazes,” or fill in a conversational break with a drawling, “Uhhmm,” while licking her lips, biting them and nodding. When she assessed student work, one phrase she used often was, “I like its positive and negative space qualities.” Very diplomatic, no? There didn't appear to be much judgment there, just observation. Then the next time a student was working at the wheel or a station, she would gently offer suggestions for improvement.

We *humans* are understood *to be made from clay* in the ancient Hebrew creation stories which we find in Genesis. Adamah, the Hebrew word for humans is also a word for earth, or clay. We are earthlings...mud people...clay. And that means we are able to be formed and reformed. The prophet Jeremiah came to understand this rather powerfully when he received a word from God to go and watch the local potter. There God said to Jeremiah:

Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? ... Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 18:6.

I find this image fascinating. To imagine that God is directly in touch with all the details of our lives is an awe-inspiring thought. On the one hand I relish it for the intimacy it suggests—that God is holding us—every nation, and every person—so closely that the stuff of our lives always touches the Holy. On the other hand, this particular description of God breaks down for me quickly. In subsequent verses Jeremiah depicts God as plotting different fates for different nations:

At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it...And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it...<sup>2</sup>

These verses suggest that God actually creates evil for some people. That troubles me. That makes God the *source* of evil! Put simply, this has never been my experience. I have said before, *and I will again*, that I will defend God's goodness with my dying breath. I simply cannot believe that God is plotting evil for any of us. We are already so deep in the muck of our own making. We pollute the gift of God's earth to us—that's our bad plotting, not God's! We find ten thousand ways to cut our selves off from one another and fight each other across beliefs, across faiths, and across national borders. That's our bad planning—not God's! We consistently create systems that keep the majority of us poor and suffering instead of sharing the abundance that God's world originally offered to everyone. All of this is the muck of our own making.

There is another way to understand God's work in our lives that is nestled in today's reading, and more fully present in my own experience. God is also depicted as saying that when we change our ways from doing evil that God will bring us blessing.<sup>3</sup> I understand this as Jeremiah's way of saying two things. First, that our actions have some influence *on God*. Second, and more importantly, that God ultimately intends the best for us. Jeremiah preached in an age when the cutting edge technology was iron weapons, in a country that was caught between many mighty Empires. Each of these Empires looted, marauded and subjugated Jeremiah's home country in turn. It must have seemed like God was using each them to teach the people of Israel something. But I pray that we can faithfully take a wider view of things now.

I stand with Jeremiah in seeing God as touching all our lives. But our own hearts and souls also shape our lives. We work *with* God in forming our lives and in response to the trouble that comes our way—not from God, but from the uneven nature of physical existence. I *do* think that God is the potter of the clay of our lives. But not one who shapes evil toward some and good toward others. Instead, I see a potter who assesses us gently, pointing out the contours of our lives—the ups and downs, the ins and outs, the positive and negative space qualities that become

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<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 18:7, 9.

<sup>3</sup> See Jeremiah 18:8, 10.

our personal terrain. Not in harsh judgment, but rather in loving observation. And when we turn from those places where we stumble and try again, God whispers all the ways we might better seek out the Holy in our lives. God keeps working with us to make and remake the stuff of our lives: forming possibilities, trying new things, revisiting enduring themes, and slowly shaping the best possible future. Each of us is in the hands of a gentle potter who works with us to face whatever comes our way.

Amen.

### **Jeremiah 18:1-10**

18The 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.