

**Clay for the Potter's Wheel**  
**September 8, 2013**  
**By Pastor Laura Hehner**

I remember all of those years ago, now,  
Walking down the streets of Jerusalem.  
That yellowish brown below my feet,  
traveling all the way up the walls to my left and right.  
That hot, dry air blowing gently into my entirely unwrinkled face over that dirt.  
Just a kid---barely 18 years old---wandering around  
between those open air markets and rolling hills by myself, but not alone.  
I for some reason thought of that place again, the other day,  
looking out the window over my sink, pouring water for a pot of coffee.  
And I wondered how it was that I ended up here.  
I think we're blessed to be struck with that feeling from time to time in our lives.  
We see pictures of ourselves, from years ago, and that face smiling back at us—  
--our face---it almost feels like someone else's, right?  
The further back you go, the more that feeling washes over.  
Of course we know it's us. We remember those times. But so much has changed.  
We've seen so many other things that have moved our minds from there to here.  
Things we never could have imagined, in those still shots with friends come and gone.  
Places seen and left, as we stand in this new place in our lives, *now*,  
That will one day be a memory too.  
  
As we live through each day, God shapes us. God forms us.

And as this short time we've got goes on, God reshapes and reforms us, as step ahead.

It's really a beautiful thing, when you think about it.

And that's what our scripture readings move us to meditate on, today.

This way God---that Life inside of us and around us

that moves eternally through all things---

Builds our lives into something unexpected,

through each of these hours we're blessed to be alive.

Now, we had a bunch of readings from the lectionary this week.

All of them good.

So, I couldn't squeeze them into the bulletin

without surely driving the liturgist nuts with too much,

But I want to talk about them with you guys, all the same,

Because they're definitely worth the thought.

They started with what's come to be I think my favorite scripture out of the entire canon.

Psalm 139. Just the first parts.

O LORD, you have searched me and known me. 2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. 3 You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. 4 Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. 5 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

Then along in the Hebrew Bible we're moved into Jeremiah 18.

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

From there we move into Jesus' life, as some of his moments are explained in the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 14, verses 25-33.

Jesus talks there about the things we sacrifice in following him. In following God.

He talks to us about leaving our old lives behind.

All of the things we find comfortable and familiar.

And about this letting go being the cost of what it takes to move along with God, and live through to completion in our life with God as we step ahead into unknown places.

And then finally we're brought to Philemon .

Writings that came after the life of Christ

as people together tried to put into practice what he taught,

And teach the same things with their own breath, each day.

Paul writes to Philemon , a friend and co-worker

who's established a house church where people can gather and grow in God.

Just as a little background, since this reading is a bit more obscure---a little less familiar--

Paul writes from prison, though scholars are unsure of where he was imprisoned or why.

His own convert, Philemon owned a slave,

Onesimus who'd run away.

And it was legally recognized practice, in Paul's day,

for a slave who'd incurred his or her master's wrath,

to flee to one of the master's associates to plea for his intervention and protection.

And the associate then served as a kind of official mediator between the two.

Paul, having converted Philemon , is just this guy,

for Onesimus .

Paul says to Philemon, verses 10-20:

10 I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. 11 Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me.

(In Paul's time, slaves were often given descriptive names,

so he's playing with that a little. Onesimus' name, in Greek, meaning "useful.")

He goes on...

12 I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. 13 I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; 14 but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. 15 Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, 16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother--especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. 17 So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18 If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. 20 Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ.

Here Paul speaks of Onesimus' new found worth,

after having failed in the past. Having been converted himself, by Paul,

during their overlap,

Paul finds a brand new use for this man---

---once in broken relationship, now restored to something new. Something vital.

Something necessary to both Paul and Philemon,

and the house church Philemon helps run.

So what are all of these passages saying?

Together, what message do they send to us from those ancient years,  
about our own experience with God, right now?

From the Psalm we hear about the deep intimacy of God in our hearts.

The truth of God knowing who and how we are, better than we know ourselves.

---God being the very force of will that created us and is creating us still.

From Jeremiah, the story about the potter and the clay.

Being shaped by God---led by God---

---molded by God, and formed into some kind of vessel.

A vessel which reveals the mind of God and shows God's handiwork in the world.

From Luke, this idea of *giving yourself up*---all of your expectations, and all of the past  
that keeps you bound by the comfort and safety of memory---

---to the molding and guidance of God's hands

as God works to shape you into what you will be.

And then to Philemon

and the story of Onesimus 's redemption.

The *reworking*, of his soul and the new value

found in him after more fully giving himself to God.

These words in each of these passages---all of it-

--brings us back to the potter's wheel....doesn't it?

They bring us back to this image of the hand of God working in our lives,

Changing us from one moment to the next.

Guiding us careful touch, and love, and attention,

into what God intends for us to be.

And even after what we've become breaks... bends...

...turns the wrong way, and can no longer be used as it was...

... to be remolded, recrafted by the loving touch of God—of Life—

To be moved back into something beautiful. Something worthwhile.

Something useful, as a vessel of God's love and intentions...

...just as long as we give ourselves fully, like wet clay,

into the tender movements of God's hands.

And with all of this, there's another message, between.

What is it, that God's shaping us into?

What do we become as we give ourselves to Life to be molded?

...A *vessel* is the word used in these thoughts from years ago, right?

What does that mean?

As I was reading through these texts,

and thinking about them over the hours and minutes after...

I kept thinking of that clay in those hands.

And what it would feel like to be doing that work, at the Potter's Wheel.

What my hopes would be. My intentions.

If we seek the heart of God, and in these stories, God is the one doing the molding,

It made me wonder about what these people were trying to say about

God's intentions for our lives, as God works with us. Reshapes us.

What these vessels were hoped to be by the hands that formed them.

And I thought back---way, way back to those years distant now---

---those ones that photos taken of me during now look like pictures of someone else.

I'd never sat before at a potter's wheel, but I'd worked before with clay,

In an art class I'd taken in high school.

We only worked with the clay for a little while---as a little side project during the year---

And I realized that what I'd made for this project was, itself, a little vessel.

I'd just received my call to ministry---yeah, real young.

(Can't believe it was that long ago and that God

wanted to work with something so small and impressionable---)

I actually, at that time, hadn't yet read Jeremiah's story about the potter,

But decided I wanted to make with my hands, what I felt inside.

And that was this sense of my soul being filled up with God...

...something that would otherwise be empty, without It.

So I took this messed up wad of nothing, and formed it carefully with my fingers,

to reflect that feeling inside of me.

I turned it into a little container. In the shape of a person,  
with arms reaching wide toward something higher,  
A carved out a hollow inside---on the chest, cutting out the symbol of a Christian fish---  
---the only thing opening into the inside of that little container.  
And just under the head, at the base of the neck,  
very carefully cut out the opening for the lid.  
After throwing it into the kiln, glaze and all completed with the finished product,  
I held in my hand something that was once silent inside of my heart,  
that now stood out in the open.  
As something real. Something that could be touched, and felt, and seen by others.  
A piece of my own soul, now right out there, in the open.

And I think that's exactly what God does with us.  
Through each of these years, as we change from moment to moment into something new,  
The form of who we are and will be,  
being constantly and tenderly led by the touch the of God,  
We become these vessels.  
If we allow ourselves to be transformed by God's leading and God's love,  
What we become in the world is an expression of God's own soul.  
Something once silent in God's own heart, now standing out in the open,  
To be heard, to be felt,  
And to carry that careful expression of God's love with us, each place we go.  
We become a very real, very touchable,

very knowable and seeable product of God's own mind.

Of God's imagination.

And there is no better, more beautiful thing we can ever hope to be or become.

Knowing the God of all creation---the one responsible

for all of those things we see before our eyes that take our breath away:

the rising mountains, those gorgeous sites interstellar captured by the Hubble,

that sound of the wind blowing through the Aspen leaves---

---we know we will never be in better hands to make us into something worthwhile.

Something wonderful. Something *useful*.

These passages remind us that as we change from year to year,

our faces and our minds changing so amazingly as we go....

As flawed as we might be at any given moment,

As long as we give ourselves fully to God's touch, to God's leading,

We come to live as an expression of God's love. God's own heart, in the world.

To be seen and felt by others, containing inside of us

just a taste of the incalculable thoughts and care of the creator of all things.

And that's something to trust. Something to celebrate.

Something to lift our faces to the sky, and feel that wind and air against our cheeks

and thank God for each day we're blessed to be changed by the Life around us.

So don't be afraid. Give yourself to God. And let God's life mold you.

After all, as clay at that potter's wheel, sitting ready under the potter's guiding hand,  
it's only an illusion that we do that sculpting ourselves anyway, isn't it...

Past each of your memories of who you once were.

Beyond each image of your own face as it changes from year to year.

...Trust in God as God changes you.

Let yourself be moved. Let yourself be used.

Carry with you the love of God's heart to each of the hearts around you,

And give praise, always, to the wonderful works of Lord.

Amen.