

“Clay in the Potter’s Hands”

Second Sermon by Rev. Rand Lankheet, at New Horizon URC, March 30, 2014

Scripture text: Jeremiah 18

Introduction:

Recently I went online and watched some “You Tube” videos of pottery making(陶器制作) .

It’s really quite amazing. The potter starts by setting a lump of wet clay (黏土) on the centre of the wheel. Then he turns on the motor which spins that wheel.

In ancient times, of course, the wheel would be spun by the potter’s own feet.

Back then, the potter (陶匠) not only shaped the clay, he also had to provide all the power for the wheel.

Everything was under the potter’s control.

Everything was done by his planning and by his power. /

-Now today, most pottery in North America, is decorative pottery. Oh, some pottery is also put to practical use....dishes, cups, vases, fruit bowls, and so on.

But in ancient days, all pottery was meant to be used. The potter knew, ahead of time, what kind of pottery he needed. Either he wanted some dishes for food, or he needed some larger jugs to store olive oil or wine. Or maybe he just needed some plain, large vessels for carrying and storing water. So he would shape the clay into the kind of container he needed.

-The LORD told the prophet Jeremiah to go to a pottery shop.

A shop which in those days would be connected to the potter’s house.

In those days, and in a warmer climate, a potter usually worked outdoors, outside his home.

-At the potter’s house Jeremiah watched the man start to make one kind of pot.

But something happened. Maybe the clay wasn’t shaping up quite right, or maybe the pottery changed his mind. So the potter started over. He formed a different kind of pot.

The LORD tells Jeremiah: “I am like that potter. And my people Israel, the people of Judah, are like the clay. I once shaped Israel, to be the kind of people I wanted.

But Israel sinned repeatedly and in many different ways. The people have become wicked.

“As the potter, I have the right to start over.

To squash down the pot I had formed, and make something completely different.

Jeremiah, you tell Israel...you tell the people of Judah...I am planning disaster for them.

I will take them as the clay, and I will start over.”

In verse 6, the Lord asks: “Can I not do with you, O Israel, as this potter does?”

-Now, basically, this is the biblical teaching of God’s absolute sovereignty (上帝绝对的主权) .

The word “sovereign” means that God is a ruler with absolute power, like an ancient king. As sovereign king, God is completely free to do what He decides to do.

And, think of it: God is the original Creator of all things, and all people.

Therefore He has the right to do anything he wants to His creation and to us, His creatures.

He is the Potter. And we are the clay.

-The imagery of God as a divine potter is often used in the Bible:

In the book of Isaiah chapter 45:9, for example, we read: “Does the clay say to the potter, ‘what are you making?’” No, of course not. The clay does not speak. It cannot speak. The clay has no say upon the potter’s decision.

Interestingly, the Hebrew word for potter is yotzer.

That noun “yotzer” is based on the verb, found in Genesis 2. There we read that God “formed” the first man, Adam. The verb is yatzar....Genesis 2. God “formed” Adam. He formed him like a Potter forms and shapes the clay on his pottery wheel.

God formed Adam, literally, from the clay, the dirt, the dust of the earth.

So even in our original creation, God exercised complete control.

And, after Adam fell into sin, God pronounced judgement on him and on all of us:

[quote] “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken. **For dust you are and to dust you will return.**”

So our bodies, when we die, return back to the dust, the clay, the dirt.

The pottery of our body, so to speak, will revert to what it originally was: Dust. Soil. Clay.

-So God says this, starting at vs. 6. [Read vs. 6-10.

God is in complete control: He is the Potter; We are the Clay.

As the Potter, He has the right to change his mind, at any time. At least as that looks to us, on earth. At one point, he might raise up a nation, as a chosen vessel, forming that nation in one way, causing it to gain strength, and riches, and territory. Then, depending on His will, God might cause that same nation to decline.

Particularly, if God sees a nation fall into sin, and refuse to repent of their sin.

That is where the imagery of the potter and the clay breaks down somewhat....the Bible teaches

that we are also responsible for our actions, for both our good and our wrong actions, and words.

In the words of the Canons of Dort (多特信约), God does not treat us as dumb, wooden objects.

In particular, God expects his people to respond in faith and obedience to him.

That as Jesus is our Saviour, he expects us to be following after Jesus, to obey him.

But if we don't, and if over time, we refuse to trust him and obey him, then....well....

the Potter simply presses down his hand as it were, on that clay vessel. That vessel partly formed on the pottery wheel. And the Potter reduces it back to a lump of clay. And the Divine Potter starts over, forming something different on his pottery wheel.

God as the Sovereign King, can decide to build up a nation; But he later can decide to tear down a nation. If it rebels against Him.

-Listen to how the LORD originally commissioned the prophet Jeremiah:

Chapter 1:10: “See, today I appoint you [Jeremiah] over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.” (看哪，我今日立你在列邦列国之上，为要施行拔出、拆毁、毁坏、倾覆，又要建立、栽植。) **Our God is Sovereign King.**

-So God over us as His covenant people, over His Church, and over parts of His Church on earth.

There's a wrong theology out there that says, or sometimes thinks this:

God will never abandon his church. Jesus will never allow his church to be destroyed.

And by that, they refer to their denomination, or to local congregation.

But, there is no promise that any individual church or denomination (宗派) of churches will continue to exist. Particularly if it starts to fall away from the Bible. Then, especially, God promises to tear down that church. +

Jesus, in the Book of Revelation tells certain churches that if they continue in their sinful ways, he will snuff them out, as a candle. Their flame will be snuffed out (吹灭, 熄灭), and their candle, will be removed from the candlestick. Jesus will do that to unfaithful churches.

So each church, each local congregation, and each broader denomination, must strive to be faithful and obedient to Jesus..not only in right theology.

But also in our actions and lifestyles. If we're not that kind of church, Jesus has every right to remove us from his lampstand (灯台) ./ So the people of Judah were given the choice: either to repent of their sin, to turn back to the Lord. Or else they could decide to continue in their wicked ways. But if they continue in those wicked ways then God will press down on them on his pottery wheel, and they will be reduced to a lump of clay.

2. How do the people respond? This is our second main point, the response of the people.

[Read vs. 12. Basically they are saying: "We will continue in our wicked ways.

We will not change." They also respond with wicked plans: [See vs. 18.

We sometimes say, "don't shoot the messenger."

If the messenger brings a bad message, it's not his fault. You may not like the message.

But don't shoot the messenger. Don't get rid of the messenger. Rather, listen to the message. But the people of Judah not only hate the message....they hate the messenger. Jeremiah.

Not only do they despise the message...they want to get rid of the messenger.

They plot against Jeremiah.

And in chapter 20, verse 2, we read that Jeremiah was beaten, and he was locked up.

How does Jeremiah react..how does he react to the peoples' response?

Well, in chapter 18, he doesn't show much love or compassion towards the people. Maybe he was afraid of them. Maybe he lost his patience in his prophetic calling (先知的呼召)

For whatever reason, he calls on the Lord to destroy the people. That the men of Judah will die, and that their wives will become widows. Now, in the NT, Jesus commands us to show agape love even to our enemies.

Even to those of the unbelieving world who hate us or want to destroy us.

Jeremiah was not showing NT, agape love.

However, God Himself has every right to destroy his proud and sinful people.

Despite him sending Jeremiah to his people, to warn them, they refuse to listen.

As Potter, God had every right to take them as a clay vessel on his potter's wheel, and crush them with his hand, and start over....making something completely new.

2.B. What about for us? What are we hearing and learning in these words of the Lord?

Let me apply our text in 4 ways.

1. First of all, we must take this as a warning for us, and for our churches.

Yes, the Lord has chosen us, and, yes, the Lord makes certain promises to us in Christ Jesus. By God's grace, in Jesus, we are God's covenant people today.

But one message running through the whole book of Jeremiah is this:

Don't presume (assume) that you will forever be God's people.

Don't assume that, particularly, if you living in sin, if you refuse to repent.

God can and He will smash those whom He appears to have chosen, if they refuse to listen to him, if they refuse to repent of their sin. So it's a warning to us, to all of us, today. And to all the churches in our land...

As the Potter, God can press down with his hand upon the wet clay, partially formed into a pot.

He can press down upon that pot, and return it to a lump of clay.

And He can start with some new clay, with some different people, forming a new kind of vessel.
-That's a warning for us, as a local church, here today, as God's covenant people./

2. Let us also be reminded of this, dear people of God.

In the fullness of time, 600 years after Jeremiah, **God the Father sent His Son Jesus to us.**

To make atonement (代赎) for our sins. Jesus proved himself to be a perfectly formed clay vessel, under the calling and command of the Father.

Jesus perfectly obeyed God the Father, as His dearly beloved Son.

And Jesus died for our sins, the sins and imperfections of his covenant people.

So by faith, we must look to Jesus...and only to Jesus. To cover up our infirmities (软弱)our weaknesses and sins as clay vessels. We are so weak and sinful in ourselves.

Even the apostle Paul says, in a different context, that he is like a cracked, clay pot,

An imperfect vessel. An imperfect piece of pottery.

But in God's mercy, Paul was given the riches of Jesus' Christ.

So despite the imperfect, clay pots that we are, we carry in our vessels the full righteousness and obedience of Jesus. And even through the cracks, through our imperfections, the glories of Jesus Christ must shine forth.

So let us be warned...**but in Christ, let us also be encouraged./**

3. Third, let us be encouraged further by this thought: **the clay on the potter's wheel is still wet clay.** It still can be moulded and shaped by the potter's hand.

That clay hasn't yet been dried or hardened in the fire.

That is to say that we as God's people, as both God's church, and as individual Christians, we are still are in process. We are still being moulded and shaped by the Potter's hands.

Think of each day of your life as that: God taking you in His own hands, as it were.

And in love He is shaping and moulding you more and more as you should be.

To become all you should be in Christ Jesus....

That should encourage you in this coming week: What is going on in your life... +

-Application also to our children, parents....+

4. And finally, remember this:

Through our lives, you and I are only the clay. We are not the Potter.

Ultimately we are not in control of our lives...God is. Christ Jesus is our Sov. Lord and King.

So, don't look on the circumstances of life as something that comes to you by chance.

Something tragic or cruel that has happened to you, by some accident.

Rather, see God's hand always at work...shaping you, improving you, moulding you:

That you would become a better clay vessel, a jar, a pot, of some kind. A vessel more beautiful,

more glorious, more loving and helpful, each day. A clay pot, carefully shaped by the potter's hand. So that God will receive all the glory and praise. **LET US PRAY.**