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Jeremiah 18:1-12, Philemon 1-21
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Building the New Community

Some years ago, on a family vacation in the mountains of North Carolina, I stumbled upon the opportunity to throw clay pots on a potter's wheel. First, I cut a sizeable hunk of red clay from the large block; then I began to work the clay, being sure to eliminate all air bubbles and small bits of trash or stone. I learned how to center the lump of clay on the wheel by pressing and shaping the unformed clay into a perfectly round flattened cone. Keeping the clay moist with a wet sponge allowed the clay to slip through my hands as I began to dig down to the center of the clay and then raise the sides of the bowl, jar or cup I was making. I found that working with clay is an intense and satisfying experience. It is one of the few creative things I have ever been able to do.

I also learned how quickly something beautiful could be spoiled. The slip of a tool, the clumsy touch of a thumb, the undiscovered air bubble or clay made soft by overworking, could suddenly transform the perfectly formed bowl into a misshapen lump of clay. Sometimes, the damage could be repaired. The tall cup became a shorter cup. Sometimes, repeated efforts to save a bowl only made things worse. Short of throwing everything out and starting over, I could always manage to make a spoon rest, which is the lowest form of pottery life. I learned that many a clay spoon rest started out life in the potter's eye and hands as magnificent bowls.

In the days before Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, God sent the prophet Jeremiah to the potter's house to watch him working at the wheel. Jeremiah noticed that when the vessel the potter was forming collapsed, the potter reshaped the clay into a new vessel. Jeremiah heard the voice of God speaking through this experience. The clay in the potter's hand was like Israel and all the nations in the hands of God. The sin, injustice, violence and immorality of the people had ruined Israel, the covenant community which God had established and called by name. God was going to break down the walls and destroy the nation like a ruined vessel in a potter's hand. God is free to tear down the broken community, reshape the ruins and build up a new community. Within a few short years, the people experienced the hard truth of Jeremiah's vision. The walls were breached, the temple destroyed, the king blinded, the young princes slain and the court, artisans and noble citizens sent into exile.

Centuries later, out of the remnant of Israel, out of the shards of clay, the bits and pieces of broken dreams, God fashioned a new people. When Jesus said, "Follow me," he called a new people into existence. To follow Jesus is to be a part of a covenant community given life by the Holy Spirit and devoted to the love of God and the love of neighbor. The church is the body of Christ that is within the world, but not of the world. The church is to embody a new ethic—the ethic of love. The love we have for one another, the love we have for the world, is the same kind of love God has for us in Jesus Christ. Like a skilled potter with clay, God takes us as a people and shapes us into a beautiful vessel made in the image of Christ.

The church is always tempted to be less than what God has fashioned the church to be. Whenever the church becomes petty, spending enormous time and energy on things that do not matter, we deface the image of Christ in us. When the church becomes mean-spirited, judgmental and unforgiving, we fracture the beautiful vessel of grace God intended us to be. Whenever the church becomes conformed to the values of the world around it and no longer stands firm in the truth of the gospel, we shatter the earthen vessel of the church.

The danger of the church losing its identity and destroying itself is nothing new. Paul wrote a letter to a man named Philemon who was a part of the church in Colossae, an ancient city that was located in what is now western Turkey. The church was fractured and in danger of being broken to bits. The good people of the church may not even have known how deep the cracks were. This short letter of twenty-one verses invites the church to be refashioned and remade in the image of Christ.

Apparently, Philemon was a man of some property who came to Christ through the witness of Paul. He had a slave named Onesimus, who ran away and went to Paul. There is a suggestion in the letter that Onesimus may have stolen something from his master, Philemon. A runaway slave had no rights. If caught, he could be beaten, maimed or even put to death. Under Paul's influence, Onesimus became a Christian. Paul sent him back to Philemon with this letter in his hand. The letter was sent to Philemon and to the church in his house. It was a personal letter; but it was not private, for the contents of the letter would reshape the whole church.

We can imagine the town was in an uproar when Onesimus returned. Everyone was speculating what kind of punishment Philemon would give him. Would he be chained, beaten or put to death? People waited while Philemon and the church read the letter. In the letter, Paul praised Philemon for his love and his hospitality toward all the saints. Paul told Philemon that even though he was bold enough to command Philemon what to do, he wanted Philemon to do the right thing for love's sake. Paul had become a spiritual father to both Philemon and Onesimus, to both master and slave. In the community of faith, this made Philemon and Onesimus brothers. Paul wanted Philemon to welcome Onesimus back willingly and without compulsion, just as freely as Philemon would have welcomed Paul himself. Paul wanted him to welcome Onesimus back, "no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother." Later, if someone would have asked Philemon why he welcomed Onesimus home and set him free, he could not have said, "My spiritual mentor Paul made me do it." He could only have said, "I did it for love's sake." As far as we know, Philemon found a new brother that day. According to early church writings, there was a bishop in Ephesus about that time, known to be "a man of inexpressible love," named Onesimus. (*Ignatius, Letter to the Ephesians*, quoted in *Interpretation Commentary: Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon*, Ralph Martin, p.141)

This new life in Christ has shattered the old social order and created a new pattern for human relationships. The crisis fostered by a runaway slave became God's way of reshaping the vessel of the church and building the new community. Even the church today is not immune to the need to be refashioned, reformed and rebuilt. The Christian community is constantly being remade as the gospel touches more and more areas of our lives and our world. The motto of the Presbyterian Church USA is *Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda*, which means the reformed church, always to be reformed. The motto states that the church is reformed according to the word of God. It also recognizes our continuing human sinfulness and our continuing need to be reformed by the work of God in the church. < /P>

The potter's tool that God uses to shape the new community is the power of Christ's love moving in the church and empowering us to love. Love provides more than the law commands. The French scholar, Theo Preiss, has written that, "Pauline ethics proceed not from law, nor from principles, but from this circulation of love of the new world which has invaded the old." (p. 41, *Life in Christ, Studies in Biblical Theology, No. 13*) It would take almost two thousand years for the ideal of human equality and Christian brotherhood and sisterhood expressed in this letter to be universally embraced by the church. The power of divine love is constantly reworking, reshaping and rebuilding the new community of the church.

Where do you see the power of love reshaping the vessel of the church? Like a potter, God is always working in us, taking away our misshapen thoughts, desires and habits, digging down to our core and lifting us to create something new and beautiful. God can take a church that is all wrapped up in itself and make it a servant church. God can take a church that is satisfied with itself and make it open to do God's work in the world. God can take a church that is never willing to try anything new and make it a vessel of innovative ministry.

You may think I am kidding, but I have known churches that got into fights over where the silver service would be stored, whether the woodwork in the dark chancel should be painted or not, whether the offering should be taken before or after the sermon, whether the color of the carpet should be changed or whether the children could play on the grass. Surely, God intended more for these churches than this!

Like clay in the potter's hands, we are clay in the hands of God. God can reshape us into a new community of greater praise and worship, of training and equipping one another for all kinds of ministry, and of nurture for children, youth and adults. God can make us into a community where the broken, discouraged, alienated and troubled are welcomed and healed.

God can take a group of diverse strangers and mold them into a family of mutual care and love. God can place these communities of faith in the midst of the city to be vessels of healing, justice and compassion. When God begins to take old worn clay pots and reshape them into something new, watch out. The power of divine love to reshape the church and build a new community cannot be stopped. Like clay in the hands of the potter, we are clay in the hands of God.