

18 Jeremiah received God's word: 2 Go down to the potter's house, and I'll give you instructions about what to do there. 3 So I went down to the potter's house; he was working on the potter's wheel. 4 But the piece he was making was flawed while still in his hands, so the potter started on another, as seemed best to him. 5 Then God's word came to me: 6 House of Israel, can't I deal with you like this potter, declares God? Like clay in the potter's hand, so are you in mine, house of Israel! 7 At any time I may announce that I will dig up, pull down, and destroy a nation or kingdom; 8 but if that nation I warned turns from its evil, then I'll relent and not carry out the harm I intended for it. 9 At the same time, I may announce that I will build and plant a nation or kingdom; 10 but if that nation displeases and disobeys me, then I'll relent and not carry out the good I intended for it. 11 Now say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem: This is what God says: I am a potter preparing a disaster for you; I'm working out a plan against you. So each one of you, turn from your evil ways; reform your ways and your actions. 12 But they said, "What's the use! We will follow our own plans and act according to our own willful, evil hearts." -**Common English Bible**

Perhaps some of you are aware that several times in the last eight years we have convened creative worship planning teams. The process we use on these teams leads to the identification of a metaphor or image from our contemporary world that can help to open up a month or so of scriptural passages. When I learned this method, the example was the use of a steaming hot cup of coffee— to be the focus for a series on purification— filtered coffee better than non filtered? Something like that. The hope was that every time the coffee drinkers in the congregation sat down with a cup of coffee, they'd be reminded of their faith. When faith teachings are linked to concrete things in our world, or familiar experiences, our lives become permeated with our faith. Remember the lights in the window one Advent? That's one of the metaphors we've used. This process is deeply biblical for two reasons— one, we derive the metaphors from a study of scripture; two, all throughout scripture, metaphors are used to open up insight into the spiritual world. Think about Jesus' parables. Consider Jeremiah 18.

Jeremiah 18 because in this chapter we see God following through on God's promise to tell Jeremiah where to go and what to say. And before God has Jeremiah preach, God sends him to a potter's house where he watches a potter throwing clay on a wheel. Some of the metaphors in scripture are not so accessible to 21st century

readers and listeners, all things related to sheep (at least to we urbans), for example, but potters still exist. Some or at least one might even be in this room. I called a potter in our congregation as I studied this text and asked if it seems sometimes that clay has a will of its own. She said, "Absolutely, you want to make a bowl, but the clay wants to be something else." There can be a lot of trial and error in throwing pottery. Clay put on the wheel and then taken off, reworked and put on the wheel again. As Jeremiah watched the potter he probably saw this repeatedly, or at least once, he saw a potter trying to throw a piece of pottery and then finding a flaw so starting over. I suspect if we took a field trip to a ceramic studio we'd see this happen a lot. After Jeremiah observed the potter, then God led him out to preach.

God through Jeremiah suggests that the relationship between God and God's people is like the relationship between potter and clay. God is working to shape a people for a certain purpose, like a potter shapes a vase for flowers or a mug for drinking, God shapes people for service and right relationships. I needed to call the potter in our congregation because the nature of Jeremiah's message is that though God is playing a primary, shaping role, the people have a great deal of freedom. Given that clay is, apparently, inanimate, I wasn't sure if the metaphor worked. But the potter affirmed that clay does seem to have a will of its own, not a conscious will which is perhaps even trickier to shape and train, but a certain freedom nonetheless. The metaphor holds.

God through Jeremiah proposes a double if/then. God can announce at any time a decision to dig up, pull down, or destroy a nation or a kingdom. Indeed, you may recognize those verbs from God's call to Jeremiah. God can announce at any time a decision to dig up, pull down, or destroy a nation or a kingdom. BUT IF the announcement serves as a warning and the nation heeds the warning and turns from its evil, THEN I'll relent and not carry out the harm I intended for it. God is just as free to announce intentions to build or plant (there are the rest of the verbs from Jeremiah's call), BUT IF that nation I intend to build or plant displeases or disobeys, THEN I'll relent not carry out the good I intended for it. Wow. That's a lot of freedom

granted to humanity. God's decree can be reversed by the nature of a human response to it.

Often people try to collapse the paradox between divine sovereignty and the freedom of creation and creatures, either suggesting that God is in control of everything or that everything is a product of free will. God through Jeremiah suggests a much more interlocked paradox that resists collapse. It reminds me of the concept of God offered by Process Theologians. Process theologians suggest that all of creation is held inside God, like a child in a womb. God makes invitations to the creation and the creation either accepts or rejects the invitations. The response of the creation then gives back to God a range of possibilities from which God extends a new invitation. There is a perpetual back and forth between creator and creation in this understanding. God's intention is to bring life and wholeness, but sometimes the free response of creation puts some constraints on what is possible. This is too fast and simple an explanation of a rather unusual theology, but doesn't it seem to fit the God we meet in Jeremiah? God invites care for refugees, orphans, and widows, just relationships, protection of innocent life, and nations and empires choose oppression, violence, destruction, and so God may choose to undermine nations and empires and lift up prophets to call people back to the practices God wills. If people take up these practices, God will invite deepened relationship and provide stability and peace, if they don't, God will allow destruction. Or destruction will be the natural consequence of choosing death over life, as people, nations, and empires so readily do.

Right now, it is apparent that most nations are not living justly. And indeed, for a long time, humans have not lived in ways that protect life on this planet. For decades now, scientists have been saying we have to change the way we are consuming fossil fuels and producing waste and generating energy or the consequences to life on our planet are going to be devastating. Already species are disappearing. Storms and fires are increasing, icebergs are melting, sea levels are rising, we're already experiencing consequences of the choices we've made. As Steve Cook has reminded us for the last several years (though not this year yet because of transitional scheduling challenges in the midst of early retirement) the situation is serious, but we do have agency. The

choices we make. The cars we drive. The energy we use. The food we eat. The people we elect. The communication we have with the people we elect, etc. etc. etc. All of this adds up.

Sadly, as reported by Reuters, it was announced this week that the Environmental Protection Agency under the current administration:

will rescind the long-standing finding that greenhouse gas emissions endanger human health, removing the legal foundation for all U.S. greenhouse gas regulations.

If finalized, the repeal would end current limits on greenhouse gas pollution from vehicle tailpipes, power plants, smokestacks and other sources, and hamper future U.S. efforts to combat global warming.

The Narrative Lectionary suggested we stop reading at verse 11, with the warning that God is going to start over with Judah if they don't reform their ways, just like a potter starts over with flawed clay. But verse 12 shows us the response of the people, "What's the use! We will follow our own plans and act according to our own willful, evil hearts." Sigh. Isn't that frequently the response to invitations to change? What's the use! We want to keep doing whatever it is we want to do. The EPA's decision this week is a prime example. Let's keep burning excess fossil fuels. Let's deny our responsibility for climate change and keep on producing and consuming to our hearts content, our willful and evil hearts' content. I included verse 12 because it tells truth. Perhaps if I ended at 11 we could feel a tad more hopeful, more in touch with our freedom and agency, more willing to let God shape us according to God's will. But whether we're talking about individuals or nations or empires, we often lose hope and put self-will, national will, imperial will, above God's will. We do. And when this choice is made, as it is so often made, rarely does it lead to lasting goodness.

But it is possible to surrender our will to God's will. To let God shape and mold us, as individuals, as a church, as a nation, as a world. We can only control ourselves so we need to start with us, but if all of us who have met Jesus through the Spirit and the church would truly pray, "Not my will, but yours, O God" and let ourselves be guided there would be positive change. I know it. We can be so discouraged by the mess of it all, and the vastness of the problems all around us, it can lead us to throw up our

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hands and say, “what’s the point?” Or we can let it lead us to our knees and say, “God show me what you need me to do.”

Last week I said God’s call grants agency. This week we see Jeremiah exercising his agency and reminding the people of their agency through the call he extends. If it all feels too hard, I invite you to your knees, literally or metaphorically (I know not everyone here should kneel, but some of us can!), not my will, but yours. Show me the way.

Let’s pray it in song once again, shall we? Don let’s revisit “Change My Heart, O God.”

Resources in addition to scripture that influenced this sermon:

I shared what I did about process theology from my memory, but I highly recommend the first chapter of *Of God and Pelicans* by Jay B. McDaniel for a good introduction to process thought. You can also read an introduction to process theology at this site: <https://processandfaith.org/resources/articles/process-theology/>

Walter Brueggeman, Rolf Jacobson, and Kathryn Schieferdecker on the Working Preacher Narrative Lectionary Podcast- <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/457-preaching-series-on-jeremiah-june-15-july-20-2025>

Stan Mast, “Jeremiah 18:1-11 Commentary” on *Center for Excellence in Preaching Website*. <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2019-09-02/jeremiah-181-11-2/>

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