

What Faith Asks of Us *Molded Creatures*

Jeremiah 18:1-11

September 17, 2023

A true prophet must love the very ones they chastise and reprimand.

Last Sunday, we began a new program year with the voice of a prophet—the prophet Isaiah—calling God's people to repair, to restore, and to rebuild. His challenge is rooted in the profound hope of a different future, if we who claim faith can boldly and courageously build it.

Incidentally, I want to thank the member of the congregation, quick-thinking and fast-acting, who upgraded the sign on our street that I was concerned about. We now have a new sign for our street: It's time to rebuild. [Rev. Henry holds up orange construction sign with the words "It's Time to Rebuild."]

Jeremiah was a reluctant prophet. It's a common story in scripture. He was commanded to speak these painful truths to people he loved. He resists. He protests. Too young. Not enough experience. God, they will never listen to me. Provided only the promise of God's unfailing presence, the young man ultimately yields. And so, Jeremiah updates his LinkedIn profile—Prophet. He begins to call his community to the radical, revolutionary act of repentance. Repentance not just for individual acts but for communal recalcitrance. Faith, he insists, compels conversion. And not just once, but time and time again. Faith compels conversion.

In this morning's passage, God invites the prophet to take a trip to the workshop of a local potter. Jeremiah watches the sculptor working at the wheel, forming a vessel out of clay. The first attempt fails, and so the artist reworks it into another vessel. Jeremiah watches closely and then listens attentively as God makes the analogy explicit. God is the potter. God's people are the clay. The image is not new. Indeed, this is how it all began. In the

second chapter of Genesis, God sculpts and shapes a lump of clay, forming humankind from the sediment of the earth. God's hands fashion us into being from the ground. God's breath gives us life animated by the Spirit.

This morning, as we begin a new sermon series on what faith asks of us, we learn at the potter's shed that God did not shape us once for all time. The very clay of our created being has not been fired. And so, faith asks us to be malleable. We are called to be good mud.

Several of you have sent me a recent column in *The Atlantic* written by David Brooks. The title of the piece is "How America Got Mean," and the observation at the heart of it is this: "We live in a society that is terrible at moral formation." Now, whether or not you agree with the particulars of Brooks' description, I take it as non-controversial that moral formation is part of what we're about in Christian community. After all, if we believed that the shape of our character and the trajectory of our lives were already formed and fixed, we'd have little use for these gatherings every week. Here, we affirm that God can and does still reshape us *and* the institutions we've created. We and they can be re-formed...rebuilt.

I do not know why you came to church today. Perhaps you are looking for a moment of peace in an anxious time. You might be here because you are always here; worship is a part of the rhythm of your life. Maybe you are desperate for a word of hope. Perhaps on the verge of an important decision. Maybe your heart is grieving or filled with joy or anger. Maybe you've come seeking forgiveness or the strength to forgive another. I don't know why you are here—maybe your mom made you come. I don't know. But I do have a hunch. It is this: that all of us share the deep desire to be made new. For all

of us, there's something we wish we could undo, some word or action we want to retract. All of us want a fresh start for ourselves and the troubled world we share.

And here's the good news, what's so encouraging about Jeremiah in the potter's house: The clay has not been fired. Something new can be formed from this lump of earth. New creation. A different world.

There's this detail in this morning's passage that is fueling my sense of hope these days. The potter has no need to change the substance with which he is working. He does not toss the clay into the trash can and take up painting instead. You see, the raw material is not the issue. The problem is that which is good has become misshapen and malformed, the flawed vessel has to be collapsed in order for the potter to begin again. Same clay, new creation.

Jeremiah loved the people he chastised and reprimanded, loved them enough to call them to collective conversion. Faith asks us to be good mud. We are called to a kind of flexibility that allows God to shape and reshape us. Here's how I hear the charge at the start of a new program year for our church: let's not be terrible at moral formation. Okay, we can aim higher than that. Let's commit ourselves to moral formation.

Fair warning: this will be particularly daunting in a time defined by entrenched polarity and dogged rigidity. There is very little in our lives that encourages malleability. I've been reading about how the broad trend of decline in church attendance is impacting the health of our society. Research consistently suggests that the evaporation of these communities accelerates extremism. As the author of one survey describes it, "Churches can be depolarizing institutions. Because being part of a religious community forces people to get along with others—including others with different views—it channels efforts into work that forms community and has little to do with division." That seems spot-on to me, which is why it concerns me when churches acquiesce to the same kinds of polarity that define broader culture or when worshipers leave communities of faith because of difference and

diversity in the pews. Now here's a little secret: there is somebody in this room who disagrees with you on a topic you both care about. Don't look around. But it's true. And it is also a strength.

We desperately need to be shaped and formed by places that challenge us, even places that make us uncomfortable. That's part of how moral formation happens. I am convinced that apart from communities like this, Christian faith is inevitably distorted and disfigured by ideologies defined by human quests for power and influence. When we are driven to warring camps we foment fear, we cultivate contempt.

I had lunch this week with my friend Dennis Sasso, longtime Senior Rabbi at our neighbor congregation Beth-El Zedeck. He shared some thoughts on the prophets with me, including this gem: one of the essential characteristics of biblical prophets was humility. So let me be clear because it's an important point in the age of artificial intelligence and assumptions of humanity's limitless potential.

The hope that Jeremiah finds in the potter's house is *not* hope in human ability. No, the clay cannot mold itself. And neither are we self-made. In a recent piece on his Substack, scholar and theologian David Bentley Hart connects conjecture of AI's ability to solve the world's problems or cause its total collapse to the character of Narcissus in Greek mythology. You may recall the story of Narcissus, who falls in love with his own reflection in a pool of water and stares at it for the rest of his life. The character provides the origin of the term narcissism, a fixation on the self.

David Bentley Hart notes that the inclination to narcissism pervades predictions on the promise of artificial intelligence. I found his conclusion compelling. He writes, "The danger is not that...our machines might become [more] like us, but rather that we might be progressively reduced to functions in a machine we can no longer control...There was after all no mental agency in the lovely shadow that so captivated Narcissus, but it destroyed him all the same."

Friends, we are not the Creator, no matter how creative we may be. We are a part of this created world. Made of mud. What faith asks of us is to be wise in choosing what and who will shape us.

In his commencement address published under the title *This Is Water*, David Foster Wallace wrote, "In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship."

Friends at Second Church, listen. We do have a choice. We are not self-made, but we can choose what will shape us. We can bow down at the altar of power—it will only fuel our fear. We can worship money and things—they will never be enough. We can pray to the idols of ideology, put our trust in trends, or find our identity in enmity of our enemies—we will only find emptiness and isolation. We can stare into the pools of self-righteousness until we've sold our souls thinking we'd bought our freedom.

Or we can worship the One who formed us. We can place ourselves in the hands of grace. We can surrender our power and yield to the Artist whose creative gifts can bring beauty out of the mess we've made.

So, here's the message from a prophet who loved the people he reprimanded. We can still be molded into a community carrying God's truth in the world. In fact, the Apostle Paul loved the image so much that he picked it up. We hold treasure in earthen vessels.

It is not too late. We can be rebuilt. We can be reformed. The clay has not yet been fired. The potter is still at the wheel.

Clay pots carrying precious cargo. God's intention from the beginning. Amen.