

“Wonderfully Made”

Valley Presbyterian Church – September 4, 2022

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

Jeremiah 18:1-11

I was fortunate to attend a high school that emphasized the arts. We were encouraged to read and write various types of poetry and prose. Many of us participated in theater, orchestra, or choir. And two classes in fine arts were required for graduation. The first was an intro course in which we were exposed to a variety of mediums: drawing, painting, and sculpture. Because I was challenged in the first two, I chose to take a second class in the third. Thus, at the end of the year, I had brought home more pottery than any loving parent could want – coffee mugs and ashtrays, plates, pitchers, and masks.

Each of these projects, before they were complete, had been fired in a kiln to make them dry, hard, and brittle. Their form and finish were, therefore, fixed and understandably misshapen. None of them were, nor should they have been, art show winners. Still, some of them have lasted now for more than three decades, decorating the walls and shelves of my mother’s basement.

The scriptures invite us to image God as a ruler and judge, a writer and teacher, a farmer and builder, a mother and father. Jeremiah 18 invites us to see God as an artisan. This image is not new here. In Genesis, chapter 2, God shapes clay, sculpting and forming humankind from the sediment of the earth. As God’s hands knead and smooth the moist dirt, God breathes life into this new creation, so that the human being is simultaneously grounded by this connection to earth and animated by the divine breath of God to have thought, will, and life.

When the prophet Jeremiah is instructed to go to the potter’s house and see this artisan at work, the clay has not yet been fired; it is not hard and brittle, it is still moist and pliable. It may be shaped and reshaped infinitely. It remains a material of possibility: moldable, flexible, and responsive.¹

In this prophetic oracle, God explains that what Jeremiah has just seen is a metaphor for God’s interaction with God’s own people. The wheel of the potter is a metaphor for God’s divine will that shapes the experiences and future of the people.

¹ Anathia Portier-Young from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Yet, this metaphor also gives room for the will of the of people to shape and decide their own future as the clay. The potter works the clay towards a desired outcome, yet the clay may resist to become misshapen and then reshaped into another vessel.

God says that if the house of Israel “does evil in my sight” and does not obey, then it will be smashed down like a vessel the potter judges to be deficient. Yet, amid these prophecies of coming destruction, there is a note of hope. God declares that “if a nation turns away from evil which I have proclaimed over it, then I will change my mind about the disaster which I intended to bring on it.” In changing her mind, God responds to a change in behavior from the people; a new direction, a different choice.

Thus, while in reality, clay is passive and subject to the will of the potter, here we are told something different. The purpose of prophecy most frequently is to convince those receiving God’s word to change their behavior and follow the commands of God by doing justice. This is an extraordinary characterization of God: for God will wait to see how Israel will decide to act. God is open to rethinking possibilities and changing direction.

The Psalmist in today’s reading says that we were wonderfully made. When we see the amazing things that human beings are capable of – beautiful music, powerful poetry, innovative discoveries in science, heart-warming acts of compassion and justice – God’s artistry is revealed. The capacities of the human mind and will are nearly limitless.

And so, we see that at the heart of the passage is the complex interaction between God the artist and maker, on one hand, and, on the other, God’s people who are like clay in a potter’s hands, but are also so much more. Wonderfully gifted as we may be, God cannot make us do anything. God cannot coerce us to use our gifts or choose to do good. Nor can God direct our lives and our will to pursue a path or purpose if we do not also choose them.

As individuals and as communities, we may well be formed through education and the practice of virtue to exercise our will for good. We may also be deformed through ambition or abuse. We are susceptible to temptation, influence, and corruption. Yet, we are also resilient and capable of astonishing transformation. Through it all, in the company of others and even in our relationship with God, each of us forms our own path and exercises free will.

If we are capable of both beauty and destruction, then why do we even need God? If we are people of free will – “wonderfully made,” as the Psalmist says – then what is God’s role in our lives?

The Psalmist begins today's first reading, saying: "O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways."

In other words, God is watching. Of this watchful God, this sacred gaze, Rabbi David Wolpe suggests:

Watching is not malevolent or dictatorial; it is a watching of gentleness, from the One who understands, and the One who is said in our prayers to have Ahavat Olam – eternal love. If we understand being watched as an act of love, as parents watch a child, the significance shifts.

To be watched by One who understands and knows you is a blessing. We are no longer alone. Most of our lives, we live inside ourselves, expressing but a small fraction of the drama, the dreams, and the pain that make us human.²

What is God watching? Our choices, our actions. What we decide to do is important to God, who gave us free will and desires for us to choose compassion, justice, and love. What type and how many guns do we want in circulation and who should have them? Where should our money be invested; in fossil fuels or renewable energies? Who would we choose to have access to health care and who makes those decisions? These individual choices and public policy decisions are exercises of our free will. God, as the prophet Micah says, has shown us what is good: to love justice, do kindness, and walk humbly with our God; and, as Jesus taught, to love our neighbors as ourselves. And, like the potter at the wheel, who continually labors to re-shape us into better vessels, God does not leave us, does not give up on us.

None of us is a fired piece of pottery. We are not hard and brittle finished products. We are, instead, pliable and changeable; filled with potential for something different or better. Just as the clay responds to the potter's touch, so God responds to us, continually molding and shaping us. In community with each other, and under God's watchful eye, we can grow and change; we can be transformed into vessels with new forms and functions who exercise our God-given wills to make different choices, to turn away from evil, to even change the mind of the divine. Thanks be to God. Amen.

² As quoted by Diana Butler Bass from *The Cottage*