

*Does the Church Speak for God Anymore? Part III*  
*Jeremiah 18: 1-11*  
*Rally Day – September 9, 2007*

Does the church speak for God anymore? We are in the third week of a lectionary sermon series of this title at looking at various perspectives on this question. This morning I will not only shine the light on the text, but also on my role as preacher and on you as lay preachers and prophets of this congregation. I believe the church speaks for God when preachers comfort the afflicted *and* afflict the comfortable. That is my job each Sunday morning. Now the first task is much easier and makes you more friends. The second task can get you in some serious trouble. Jeremiah found that out in his ministry, as he both built up and tore down the people of Israel. Holding these two in tension is the job of the prophet and preacher. The danger comes in getting these out of balance. Only comforting the afflicted creates a lukewarm, self-centered community of faith. Only afflicting the comfortable creates fear, dissention and ultimately hopelessness.

Jeremiah's text today is a perfect example of keeping these two tasks in balance and tension. Jeremiah hears God say to him, "Go down to the potter's house and there I will give you my message." Do you wonder why it happened that way that Jeremiah had to see this ancient craft for himself? Now I am not a crafty person. I have never sat at the potter's wheel before. I wanted to experience this craft but I didn't want to go to a pottery lesson, so I went instead to the Internet. There is so much information on the Internet on pottery and pottery making. There are even UTube videos on every step of the pottery-making process.

How many pottery experts do we have here today? Any novice pottery makers? Let me tell you about the ancient craft of pottery making and a few of the details of this craft. Historians claim, based on archeological information, that the pottery wheel was invented sometime between 4000 and 6000 BC in Mesopotamia. Pottery artifacts are key messengers about ancient cultures – their economies, languages and religions. Now there are probably a few things that have changed technologically in the way that pottery is created on the potter’s wheel, but not that many. The processes have largely stayed the same for making, say, a vessel like this Communion chalice.

First, you take a hunk of soft clay like this and “wedge” it. This is the process of working and rolling the clay to eliminate the air bubbles that could cause problems a little later. You are now ready to throw the clay on the wheel. Now you have water immediately to your side to keep the clay malleable and soft. The next step is to “center” the clay on the wheel. Gently you push the clay form to the center of the wheel so the finished product will have the right geometric dimensions. You are now ready to “open” the clay, gently using your fingers from the top to open the spinning clay so that you can manipulate its walls. After opening the clay you can now do perhaps the hardest work, which is to “throw” the emerging clay form. This is the delicate work of raising the wall of the emerging vessel, ensuring the proper shape in terms of wall thickness. The key is to keep the clay moist, while at the same time applying just the right pressure to maintain perfect thickness of the walls. Failed pottery that needs to be re-shaped often fails in this process. After the clay vessel is properly shaped various tools can be used to craft the outside walls and smooth the clay. *Trimming* involves removing the excess clay from the finished form. The finished product is then fired in the kiln.

Pottery making, in all of its complexity, is a wonderful motif for a theology speaking about God and God's mysterious relationship with humankind. It captures the tension between God's sovereignty and our free will. It balances the message of God's wrath and God's steadfast love. We see God the potter personally involved in shaping human life. We see humanity absolutely dependent on the potter for the shaping of life. Notice that the potter doesn't throw away people or nations, but instead reworks them for God's purposes.

So how are we as humanity like the clay fashioned upon God's wheel? The first human in the creation story was Adam, which men's person from the earth, person of clay. One of the steps of "wedging" us for God's purposes is to get the air or the pride out of our systems. As the old wisdom saying goes, "pride goeth before the fall." All failed human endeavors can find pride at the root of their destruction. Just as air bubbles will ruin this chalice in the fire of the furnace, so will pride kill the person or the nation. Ronald Reagan, recalling an occasion when he was governor of California and made a speech in Mexico City said this laughing at his own pride: "After I had finished speaking, I sat down to rather unenthusiastic applause, and I was a little embarrassed. The speaker who followed me spoke in Spanish -- which I didn't understand -- and he was being applauded about every paragraph. To hide my embarrassment, I started clapping before everyone else and longer than anyone else until our ambassador leaned over and said, 'I wouldn't do that if I were you. He's interpreting your speech.'" Pride confuses us and makes us worthless in the eyes of God. In making clay it is essential to have water nearby at all times to keep the clay moist. The water of the Spirit is our tears. They heal us and keep us humble. When we cry in compassion for others or in repentance for our

own errors we assist the work of the potter in reshaping our lives for God's purposes. Centering the clay is essential to keep the clay vessel in the proper geometry. In the same way we must be spiritually balanced or centered. Centering prayer is one way that we keep our lives and actions obedient to the Grand Potter. When we are spiritually centered we are less likely to fall and become worthless to God's purpose in ministry. "Opening" and "throwing" represent the ways in our daily circumstances that our hearts are open to the calling of the Spirit and the walls of our being have the right thickness or boundaries in working with others. If our walls are too thin, they break under the pressures of the world. If too thick we become calloused to the needs of the world around us. "Trimming" is the process of ridding ourselves of the unnecessary material things in our lives. We want to travel lightly and God's trimming prepares us for our spiritual journey. Fully formed we are now ready to be fired by God, to go through life's tests, so that we can be useful vessels of the God of the universe.

But even with all of our best efforts, we remember that God is the Potter. God is totally sovereign to bring about the outcome that God wants. Jeremiah reminds us of that with disturbing language. God will have God's way. God's wrath is not based on the actions of an angry God, but one whose laws are perfect and orderly. So God is sovereign, but also intimately involved in every detail of the shaping of the life of yours and of mine. In the frigid waters around Greenland are countless icebergs, some little and some gigantic. If you'd observe them carefully, you'd notice that sometimes the small ice floes move in one direction while their massive counterparts flow in another. The explanation is simple. Surface winds drive the little ones, whereas the huge masses of ice are carried along by deep ocean currents. When we face trials and tragedies, it's helpful to

see our lives as being subject to two forces--surface winds and ocean currents. The winds represent everything changeable, unpredictable, and distressing. But operating simultaneously with these gusts and gales is another force that's even more powerful. It is the sure movement of God's wise and sovereign purposes, the deep flow of His unchanging love.

The image of the potter reminds us of God's unchanging love. Gently shaping and reshaping, God never gives up on us. Never forget that. God never gives up on us. Centuries ago a monk announced he would be preaching the following Sunday evening on "The Love of God." As the shadows fell and the light ceased to come in through the cathedral windows, the congregation gathered. In the darkness of the altar, the monk lighted a candle and carried it to the crucifix. First of all, he illumined the crown of thorns, next, the two wounded hands, then the marks of the spear wound. In the hush that fell, he blew out the candle and left the chancel. There was nothing else to say. What Christ experienced on the cross is the greatest evidence of Christ's redeeming/resurrecting love. So we return to this stoneware chalice. It is the greatest symbol of our worship life of God's ongoing, non-stop redeeming and resurrecting activity in the life of God's people of Bering.

Today is Rally Day. So what do we rally about? As we go downstairs and visit the ministry tables and look at the sign-up sheets, let's remember this: we are works in process (clay that God is fashioning) in discipleship. As we covenant to participate in volunteer activities, to apply the gifts that God has given us, we affirm that yes, Lord, I am yours – shape me, use me, prepare me so that I can be useful to you – a vessel of your steadfast love.