

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, September 4, 2016

Jeremiah 18:1-11

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

Then the word of the Lord came to me: Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

Luke 14:25-33

Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my

disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

Let us pray....Amen.

I have mentioned many times that the God of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scripture, is quite different from the God of the New Testament, or the Christian Scriptures. The difference, of course, is Jesus. The presence of Jesus on earth not only changed humanity for all time, the presence of Jesus on earth changed *God* for all time!

Our Hebrew Scripture this morning comes from the prophet Jeremiah, where God used the metaphor of a potter and clay to describe the relationship between God and God's people. This is a classic understanding of one way that God relates to God's people: God shapes us, and molds us, into the vessels we will become.

God is like the potter, and we are like the clay. And in that scenario, how much control does the clay have in reaching its final shape? Absolutely none. In the Potter and the clay metaphor, God has all the power, God has all the say in what shape the clay will eventually take.

Now, this is in stark contrast with our Gospel lesson from Luke: in this reading, Jesus uses a series of metaphors to describe how the people of God can shape their relationship with him: we can choose Jesus over our family, we can carry our crosses and follow him, we can look ahead to estimate the cost of being a follower of Jesus, and we can calculate how to arrange our resources in order to be successful, and finally, we can choose how to prioritize our lives between acquiring possessions or following Jesus.

What stands out between these two passages for you today? What seems to be the contrast that God is asking us to grasp today? In the first passage, the clay has no say in what it will become. In the second passage, the people of God can choose Jesus over earthly relationships, the people of God can choose to carry a cross and follow Jesus, the people of God can choose to calculate the cost of being a follower of Jesus, and adjust their resources accordingly so that they will be successful, and finally, the people of God can choose how to prioritize their lives between acquiring earthly possessions and following Jesus.

The God of the Old Testament gives the people of God little choice. The God of the New Testament gives the people of God all the choice.

If we think about this like the developmental stages of a baby, it begins to make some sense: although a newborn gets fed or changed when they cry, they really don't have much say in the way things go around the house.

But as a child matures, parents begin to give them a little more say in defining things like the clothes they wear, the color of their room, the music they listen to...until a child reaches their teen years, and they insist that they should be able to make all the important decisions for their life, like hair color, piercings, tattoos, diet, how late they stay out...you get the picture.

Our faith development is not too different from a child's development into an adult: early on as Christians, we may not have much say in how we are formed, but as we mature in faith, God gives us more and more control over how we define ourselves as faithful children of God, even to the point where we can even choose not to be faithful anymore. We get to choose whether we even wish to be Christian at all!

To put this in theological terms, the more we mature, the more we can exercise our God-given gift of free-will, even to the point where we choose to no longer follow Jesus.

I don't believe God punishes people like God did in the Hebrew scriptures, but I do believe that there are consequences to choosing to acquire material goods over following Jesus. There are consequences to living beyond our means, there are consequences when we fail to carry our own crosses and fail to follow Jesus.

In one of the churches I served, I met a man who had lived a very challenging life: his mother had been a prostitute, he had never known his father, and each of his brothers and sisters had a different father. He rarely attended school, and had spent most of his early years on the streets.

He had no control over the circumstances of his life. As he aged, he began to make decisions for himself. He found a job, earned money so he could afford an apartment. But without some basic parenting, he had difficulties getting along with people, and frequently ended up in jail after getting into bar fights.

He had two children with two different women, but ran away so he didn't have to pay child support. He finally settled down when he was hired as a dish washer in a restaurant, and the manager took him under his wing, and

began helping him budget, pay his taxes, and generally make good decisions about his life. Things began to get better.

Until the day that he received notice that his wages were being garnished to pay back child support for his two children, both of whom were adults already.

According to the courts, he owed over \$100,000.00! See, he had a choice to be responsible for his children, or not; and when it all caught up to him, he wasn't being punished, he was simply dealing with the consequences of not paying child support for two children for 18 years.

He vowed to make good on his debt. But with the child support coming out of his paycheck, he could barely make rent, or buy food. His pain comes from knowing that if he wants to do the right thing now, he's going to have to sacrifice comfort, even necessities, in order to pay off what he rightfully owes. Some days, he would say, it would be so much easier to just run away and find work under the table, so he wouldn't have to pay his debt.

But he doesn't do that. He continues to work hard, to pay his debt, one paycheck at a time, even though his life now is so much harder than it would be if he hadn't picked up that cross.

He realizes that he has all the power, he has the free-will to choose how his life will be. He can't choose what the consequence of avoiding child-support for 18 years will be, but he can now choose to pay his debt, or run away. I'm proud of his choice to stand firm and pay his debt, but it's obvious that it's not easy for him.

On his worst days, he wishes he could just disappear. But always, a day or two later, he remembers that he is in charge of his life, and he chooses to live it in a way that is different from the way he was raised.

We each have free-will when it comes to the way we live our faith lives. We are not simply lumps of cold, wet clay, unable to have any say in what we are to become. We are not helpless when it comes to the way we live our lives.

We have a choice. We have a gift from God, a will to live the way we choose. But with that choice, comes consequences. We can choose to place Jesus ahead of our earthly relationships. Or not. Either way, there will be consequences. We can choose to carry our own crosses and follow Jesus, or not. Either way, there will be consequences. We can calculate the cost of following Jesus, and adjust our expenses, so to speak, or not. Either way, there will be consequences. And the consequences won't be a punishment, they will be a natural process of our choice.

Like choosing to run away from child support leads to the natural consequence of having your wages attached until you pay your debt.

How will you exercise your free will today? What will your choices that you make today and tomorrow say to God about the depth of your commitment, the strength of your faith?

Yes, we are still being molded by God, yes we still have less control than we would like, yes, we have free-will, free choice, freedom to follow Jesus, or accept the consequences of not following Jesus.

But at the end of the day, this day, and every day going forward, will you reflect on the many ways you showed God how much you love and appreciate Jesus, by the way you treated others, or will you reflect on the ways you avoided acting as a beloved child of God.

Because we'll all be reflecting on both ways. We're human, we're flawed, and we do things we don't mean to do, or we mean to do things we never

get around to doing...either way, we will incur the consequences of our actions, whether immediate or delayed.

What will you choose to do? Thanks be to God that we have a choice.

Amen.