

September 4, 2016
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“God of the Crackpots”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Jeremiah 18:1-11 ~ Luke 14:25-33

It was a cold Chicago December morning, about five degrees at 8:00 a.m. As I was walking to my seminary class, I saw my friend Jessica hit an icy patch. After a few gyrations, she went sprawling headlong onto the pavement. Immediately, she jumped up and resumed the pace. She didn't even look around. I figured she was embarrassed. Whenever I fall my pride hurts just as much as my injury and I am one world class faller ... as all of you can attest. In fact I have probably taken a tumble in every major city in America, and in several foreign countries. And my vast experience does make me particularly sympathetic. "Are you okay?" I asked her after rushing over. "Yes," she said mournfully, "but I guess everybody will hear about this in one of your sermons!" Well, she was right ... now you have!

It's one of the liabilities of having a preacher as a friend or family member. You might just wind up as a sermon illustration. We really can't help it. We're supposed to say something intelligent every Sunday, or at least try. But we know, what people really remember are the stories! So 24/7, our eyes are roving, our ears are perked, our feelers are out ... we are looking for stories that will preach.

That's what Jeremiah was doing the day he strolled down to the potter's house and watched him make a simple clay pot. In Jeremiah's time, clay pots were the stuff of daily life. It would be like using cars or computers as a sermon illustration today. They used clay pots for everything ... cooking, eating, transport, storage. They used them for lamps, for drinking, for bathing, for washing. They used clay pots to clean their other clay pots.

Clay pots were so important ... for so many centuries ... that archaeological experts today use them like fingerprints. The clay pots talk to them! The pots tell them where they came from and when they were made ... sometimes even who made them. They speak with their designs and paint styles and sources of raw mud and clay. They reveal the firing techniques and special marks made by different artisans. Consequently, the clay pots announce the date of different levels of a particular ancient site ... and track routes of commerce between different places at different times. But of all clay pots, none was ever so eloquent as the pot Jeremiah noticed that day at the local potter's place.

Have you ever watched somebody at work who is skilled at a craft, I mean a true master ... how deftly ... almost automatically their fingers move as they form something beautiful or something useful out of a lump of clay or pile of sand or a block of wood? Like Yogi Berra said, "*You can observe a lot by watching.*" Jeremiah was transfixed. But as he watched this potter shaping the clay, something went wrong. The clay would not follow the intended design. Even this expert could not make the clay do what he wanted. So after trying for a few minutes ... working it, working it, working it ... he gave up, changed his mind, pounded the clay back into a lump, and

started over from the beginning! Then, he shaped out a new vessel according to his revised plan. And Jeremiah said, "That's it! I've got my sermon illustration for this Sunday!" (I just can't describe what a relief you feel when that happens!) But what an interesting sermon Jeremiah found in that potter and his pot!

To begin with he saw a parallel between the potter and God as Creator. The Bible has several creation stories. The best known are the two different accounts we find in the first two chapters of the book of Genesis. Genesis one pictures a remote God speaking the universe into existence where nothing existed before and separating everything into its rightful role. This is a transcendent, wholly other God-at-a-distance, who puts everything in its place and maintains carefully prescribed boundaries. This is the left-brained God of law and order ... everything and everybody in its proper place, without exception. This is the God of the police officer, the judge, the accountant, the attorney, and the city planners. This is the God of Reason.

Genesis two pictures more of an artisan God, who forms *adam* ... a word that means "human" ... out of the dust of the ground much the way a potter might shape a clay pot. This is an immanent God ... intimate, close-at-hand ... who blows the breath of life into the dead clay and walks in the garden in the cool of the evening with the human prototypes. This is the right-brained God of passion and unpredictability ... the God of surprise and wonder ... of diversity and variability. This is the God of the poets and painters, of the inventors and fashion designers and country and western singers. This is the God of Imagination.

Neither of these Genesis creation stories are modern scientific accounts, but they are both true because God *is* all that. Yet Jeremiah is working more with the Genesis two picture of an artisan-creator God. In Genesis two ... and in Jeremiah's sermon ... God stays involved ... hands on ... continually shaping the destinies of nations and peoples. In other words, for Jeremiah, God isn't finished yet. God isn't finished creating. God isn't finished saving. God isn't finished shaping history on the grandest or the smallest of scales. In other words, God is still speaking!

And there's an amazing insight to Jeremiah's picture of God as the potter here. Jeremiah implies that God messed up. That's right. God's grand design didn't work out. The pot went wrong in the potter's hands. To be sure, we don't need the Bible or any long winded preachers to tell us that. If the world today is what God originally intended it to be ... well then, as Woody Allen suggests ... God is a serious underachiever! But the world isn't what God wanted it to be, at least not yet. Whose fault is that? Jeremiah implies here ... and asks explicitly elsewhere ... how could God let this world deteriorate to the point it has? And this is even more surprising ... Jeremiah suggests that ... like the potter ... God might just change God's mind ... and decide it was a mistake to make us in the first place ... and start over again. This is not the Greek picture of the Unmoved Mover, the perfect, unchanging God who is the same through all eternity ... no, this is a responsive God ... a relational God ... a God who might be affected by the way we behave ... and behave accordingly in return.

The biblical record bears this out. How often does God have to intervene because the people God has appointed to oversee creation have fouled it all up ... broken covenant relationships ... perpetrated violence and injustice ... spoiled the land, and flooded the world with hatred? Yes, the Bible gives us a God who holds us accountable for what we do with what God has given us. Yes, the Bible pictures a God who moves aggressively in judgment, even against the people of

God. But God's judgment is the expression of God's love. God's judgment is God's salvation for all the victims of a world gone wrong. The Biblical authors raise the question in a faithful but courageous way about who's to blame for the sorry messes we keep making. And to be sure, we are! But have you ever wondered ... doesn't God share some of the fault, too? Maybe that free will thing was a mistake after all. The jury's still out on that. We might just use our free will to destroy creation and each other. Jeremiah says that God's creation has gone terribly awry and we humans are just a bunch of crackpots who can't get it right!

We think God's moral vision is all about us and our personal individual sins. But God's judgment transcends all our mudslinging or idealistic political debates where we like to think words are the equivalent of deeds. God's moral vision isn't about us ... it's about getting us to think of others. God's moral vision isn't about lofty words ... it's about loving, healing, life-giving actions. God's judgment addresses God's concern with the whole nation, the whole society, the whole world. And God always starts this judgment in the Bible with God's own people, who, of all people, ought to know better.

What's God's problem with us? Read the prophets! Read the words of Jesus! It's not written in a secret code! God has given us this wonderful creation with a wondrous diversity of people. And we have repeatedly, habitually, congenitally raped the environment, despised the stranger, and warred with each other. We have disregarded the victims of our materialism. We have ignored the plight of people who have suffered through no fault of their own and who have no voice in the powers that rule over them with reckless disregard. We have pursued international policies that exploit other nations and support "friendly" tyrants in the name of national security but actually for national prosperity ... not for our safety but for our greed. Where are God's people saying that God loves all the children of the world ... demanding that our leaders of whatever party address the needs of the dispossessed ... and maintain the environment for the generations to come? Of all people, we ought to know better! Don't you know it makes God want to pound the clay back into a lump and start all over again? The very thought of that should give us the shivers!

But what did the Lord say through Jeremiah? *"Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings"* (Jer 18:1-11). It wasn't too late. God gave them another chance. But in Jeremiah's day, they turned away from Jeremiah's hard words and turned instead to other prophets ... the ones who made them feel good ... who told them they were God's favorites ... who gave God's blessing to whatever they wanted to do regardless of whom it hurt. And they went into exile just a few years later.

Jeremiah was called "the weeping prophet" and was thought of in his time as kind of a whiner ... and I'm sure many considered his words the ravings of some lone nut. After all, no matter how many people have stood on our street corners through the years with signs that said, *"The End is Near,"* we are still here and the end has not come. The world keeps on spinning the way the world always has, but then we keep on getting the kind of world we deserve, garbage-in, garbage-out, empires rising (and falling!) with violence and suffering and evil all around. Will we ever learn? Will we ever do better? Or should God finally give up and intervene? How long will God be patient? To Jeremiah's question and ours, "God, how could you let these things happen?" God asks us, "Well, how could you?"

But Jeremiah is not all bad news. There is a gospel in his potter's story about God ... because God does not give up altogether on the clay. Jeremiah wants to say, God is still hands on with us. God is still shaping our lives towards a good end. God still wants to make something beautiful ... something useful of this creation. So God will not let us go. The forces of God's transforming hand may be hard to take at times, but God has a reason behind it. God is not finished with me yet or with you. God is not finished with any of us. The work of creation goes on and we can choose to be pliable, responsive subjects of God's gentle urges or we can choose the harder disciplines of God's judgment. Either way, it seems, God is intent on making something good out of this clay. That's grace. That's good news. That's why the world can still change for the better. Late in the biblical history, Jesus still calls people out of the easy, safe life of going with the status quo to being his cross bearing, risk taking, countercultural agents of God's love ... always subversive to those who advocate a "me-first" world ... because it isn't too late.

Isaac Luria, the great architect of Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical philosophy, also compared creation to shattered pottery. He said that God intended to create perfect vessels which would contain the Divine light without flaw. But the light was too much for these vessels to carry and they shattered into billions of pieces ... the sparks of light flying out with them. Each of us carries a spark of this Divine light, and as we come together and let our light shine, we come closer to putting the whole light back together again. Each act of love or kindness or charity or community heals the world and restores the light. We may not see more than a few bits and pieces coming together here and there, but God is always at work in the world to bring all the light back together again, so we must not lose hope.

Earthen vessels! Clay jars! You see? It isn't about us. It's about God, and how God can form our being. It's about God and how God can love the world through us.

Well, then, my fellow crackpots! Let your light shine! Let God finish a good work begun in you! Let God shape us into the beloved community! But let us always remember what God wants our world to be.

May we pray?

We are only clay pots, cracked pots at that - flawed, wanting, failing in so many ways to live up to the design you intended. And yet, you do not give up on us. Make us aware, responsive, pliant to the gentle shaping of your Spirit. And help us to better than we have before, to make this world a place that shows forth your love, in the name of Christ. Amen.