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Jeremiah 18:1-10

*We Were Made for This*

Our scripture lesson this morning comes from the prophet Jeremiah, who God appointed “over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” (Jeremiah 1:10). In other words, he was called by God to warn Israel that they were breaking their covenant with God through idolatry and injustice - and that they needed to change - to turn back to God - if they didn’t want to suffer the consequences. Our passage uses metaphor to make a point, and may be familiar to you. If you took some play-doh from one of the children, I invite you to hold it and shape it, and “touch” the text.

I am expanding our reading by one verse. Listen now to the Word of God from Jeremiah 18:1-11 from The Message translation:

<sup>1-2</sup> GOD told Jeremiah, “Up on your feet! Go to the potter’s house. When you get there, I’ll tell you what I have to say.”

<sup>3-4</sup> So I went to the potter’s house, and sure enough, the potter was there, working away at his wheel. Whenever the pot the potter was working on turned out badly, as sometimes happens when you are working with clay, the potter would simply start over and use the same clay to make another pot.

<sup>5-10</sup> Then GOD’s Message came to me: “Can’t I do just as this potter does, people of Israel?” GOD’s Decree! “Watch this potter. In the same way that this potter works his clay, I work on you, people of Israel. At any moment I may decide to pull up a people or a country by the roots and get rid of them. But if they repent of their wicked lives, I will think twice and start over with them. At another time I might decide to plant a people or country, but if they don’t cooperate and won’t listen to me, I will think again and give up on the plans I had for them.

<sup>11</sup> So, tell the people of Judah and citizens of Jerusalem my Message: ‘Danger! I’m shaping doom against you, laying plans against you. Turn back from your doomed way of life. Straighten out your lives.’

This is the word of God for the people of God.

We were made for this. And this, is change.

Change is what we will be talking about in this 4 week sermon series. And we have seen a lot of change - in the start a new school year, in saying goodbye to friends and family who have moved away or passed on, in changing health conditions, relationships, job, and identities. We have also seen a lot of change at PCO through COVID, staff changes past and future, that have led to searching and listening for who we are - and a new vision for 2030.

We were made for this. God made us for this.

I remember this story from my childhood as the straightforward metaphor “God is the potter and I am the clay.” My mom still has a mug from my middle school days that she made with these words written into it with her own hand. I love to drink from it when I visit her - it is a passage that always felt good and solid, like clay, interpreted as God is always shaping us and molding us - active in our ever changing lives, and that was comforting.

As I read this now, thinking about the context of the passage, and encouraged by this sermon series to think about change, I recognize that it requires more of me, more of us, than being simple lumps of clay molded by God. It requires imaging that we are not passive lumps of clay, molded, moved, torn down, and reshaped at God’s whim. It requires remembering that in Genesis 2, God formed humans from the clay of the earth, and breathed God’s own spirit into us, making us living, growing, shifting, changing beings.

This passage is about choosing change - for us, and for God.

We were made for this. God made us for this. Even God was made for this.

I wonder how many of you have ever thrown pottery? It was a common practice in Jeremiah’s time and a metaphor that people would have “put their hands on”. I have watched it many times but only done so once myself. Potters who are good at their craft can make it look easy. I did not find it easy: you have to use the right kind of clay, the clay has to be centered correctly, you have to use the right amount of water, your body position matters, as does the amount of pressure you put on the

clay, and you've got to get the speed right.<sup>1</sup> And sometimes, just when you are almost finished, something goes awry and you have to start all over again. It takes practice and patience and cooperation between potter and clay. It can be frustrating - and it is beautiful. I wonder if that is how the Potter God feels about us. It is easy to think about being the potter - the one who holds the power over the clay<sup>2</sup>.

In this metaphor, we are not the potter. We are the clay - and God works on us. The metaphor alone in verses 3-4 would have us believe that God would start over with us if something wasn't right. That we would be smashed down and reformed at God's whim. But that is not where this passage takes us. Instead, God makes it clear that we have a say in the process, that we are in relationship with God, that we can change - specifically we can repent and return to God - and that God can change too.

We see this in the literary structure of declaration and "if/then" statements<sup>3</sup>. In verse 7 God says "I may decide to pull up a people or a country by the roots and get rid of them." and in verse 8 we get the if/then statement: But if they repent of their wicked lives, I will think twice and start over with them. The same structure is repeated in verses 9-10 "I might decide to plant a people or country, but if they don't cooperate and won't listen to me, I will think again and give up on the plans I had for them." God is willing to change God's mind - to be open to a different possibility - to being affected by Israel's decisions and behavior.<sup>4</sup>

We were made for this. God made us for this. God is made for this. We were made for this together. *And this change is in the form of repentance.*

There is another catch to my childhood memory verse, "'God is the potter and I am the clay" - and that is the use of the first person singular, I. Jeremiah's prophecy is about more than the individual relationship with God - it is about the community -

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<sup>1</sup> <https://potterycrafters.com/pottery-wheel-mistakes-and-how-to-fix-them/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-23-3/commentary-on-jeremiah-181-11-5>

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggeman, *Jeremiah 1-25: To Pluck Up, To Tear Down*. Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988. p161

Tyler Mayfield, Working Preacher online commentary:

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-23-3/commentary-on-jeremiah-181-11-5>

<sup>4</sup> Tyler Mayfield, Working Preacher online commentary

the nations, the people of Israel. It is about how we work together to bring about God's kin-dom. It is about the church being co-creators with God and how we listen, together, for what God is asking of us, over and over again; to change our ways, to return to God, to recognize what is not working within our walls, in our community, in our country, and in our world and to work for justice. It is about being willing to be reshaped and molded by God in relationship with God.

God makes clear that their desire for Israel is repentance, for relationship with God alone. We hear it in the pleading of verse 11:

<sup>11</sup> So, tell the people of Judah and citizens of Jerusalem my Message: 'Danger! I'm shaping doom against you, laying plans against you. Turn back from your doomed way of life. Straighten out your lives.'

God is saying doom is not really what I want for you, and you have a choice. God is issuing an invitation to Israel to change their ways and return to relationship with God.

Spoiler alert: Israel's response to God is not one of repentance. Instead the city, the temple, the nation, are destroyed. And still, that is not the end of the story. Just as the potter does with clay, God continued - and continues an active role in their lives, and in our lives, starting fresh, using who we are - who we are created to be - to make something beautiful.

We were made for this. God made us for change. God is made for change. We are made for this together.

Imagine yourself as clay for a moment, going back to the words in Genesis 2:7 when God formed humans out of the dust of the ground and breathed life into them, making us living creatures. Imagine now that we are clay together, as a community, as a people of God. We are beautiful things made out of the dust and in the image of God. And we have a choice in how we respond to God. This mornings' Confirmands are making the choice to explore with depth and intention their understanding of and relationship with God and the church. We are making a choice to support and guide them, just as we did at their baptisms. During our education hour this morning, we will be exploring forms of prayer. Prayer is the backbone of our relationship with God, and the way we hear God moving in our lives, molding and

shaping us for a more beautiful relationship with our Creator, Christ, and Comforter.

We can choose repentance and justice and to live in right relationship with God and one another. And we can choose otherwise. And God, the Potter, will mold us and shape us through all of our choices, over and over again as we learn and grow through all of our individual and corporate life. God will not abandon the wheel, God will continue to get God's hands dirty and gently form us into a relationship with God. Thanks be to God.

Amen.