

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Reformation

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Putty in God's hands

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: ²“Go down to the potter’s house, and there I will give you my message.” ³So I went down to the potter’s house, and I saw him working at the wheel. ⁴But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.

⁵Then the word of the Lord came to me: ⁶“O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?” declares the LORD. “Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. ⁷If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, ⁸ and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. ⁹ And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, ¹⁰ and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.

¹¹ “Now therefore say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, ‘This is what the Lord says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.’

—Jeremiah 18:1-11

How do you think it would go over these days if a preacher today stood up and said: “My fellow Americans, God is on the side of China and Russia and North Korea? God is going to use America’s enemies to bring this depraved, immoral nation to its knees. God is going to use ruthless people who hate this country to kill the men, women and children who live here, to destroy this country’s institutions of finance and commerce, and to burn its houses of worship to the ground. And when you see America’s enemies all lined up to destroy her, God wants you to go over to their side, desert your fellow patriots and countrymen, and join them”? How do you think that kind of message would go over? How would such a preacher be received on social media today? Would he be despised as a turncoat and a traitor? Would people cover their ears and shout him down? Would people want to get their hands on that wretched preacher of madness and destruction and beat him into a bloody pulp?

Now you understand what it was like to walk in the shoes of Jeremiah the prophet. How would you like to be Jeremiah? God has called you to preach, so you have to preach. You can’t make up your own sermon; you can only preach the words that God gives you to say. And this is God’s message: The Babylonians are going to destroy this land, put people to death by the sword, burn the cities and the temple. And when you see them surrounding the city, the only way you’re going to survive is if you go out and join them. Do you think it strange that people beat Jeremiah, put him in the stocks, threw him into a cistern, left him for dead? How else could you get this guy to be quiet and stop preaching gloom, doom and destruction?

600 years before Christ Judah was proud, arrogant. “We don’t need God,” was the prevailing social thought. “Our military is strong, our alliances are powerful, our future is secure,” people reasoned. They forgot one thing: God is not mocked by human disobedience and depravity. And God is still in control.

Ancient pottery can be found all over the Middle East. Dig down through any archeological rubble and you’ll find pottery. Clay earthenware was used for drinking, for cooking, for shipping goods like wine and olive oil. If you dig through the layers of ancient rubble, you can tell how old the site is by the style of the pottery. You can tell where on earth the goods were imported from by the style of the pots, who traded with whom. You can learn lots about the times and the culture just by analyzing the clay fragments from the pots. Pottery was everywhere. And with Jeremiah the prophet the Lord used a simple lump of clay in the hands of a potter to teach a powerful lesson. The most wealthy person, the most powerful nation, the most influential king and the most insignificant peasant all have one thing in common: They are all just putty in God’s hands.

“Go down to the potter’s house, and there I will give you my message.” It’s a simple but powerful illustration that God used with Jeremiah. “I went down to the potter’s house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.” You know how a pottery wheel works; the potter throws a lump of clay on the wheel and turns it, forming it and shaping it into whatever he wants it to be. What does the end result look like? Whatever the potter wants it to look like! What does the clay have to say about the process or the outcome? Absolutely nothing! The clay is inert, passive, formed by the hands of the potter alone.

It’s a simple lesson, but it is hard to take to heart. As Christians you and I value hard work. We value careful planning. I hope you are diligent and faithful managing the things God has placed into your care, planning to put

your kids through school, planning for retirement. We value good choices, wise decision-making, perhaps careful investing, solid business practices. But always subordinate to God's will: "Your will be done!" Don't ever let it go beyond that! Oh, we Americans—we think we have it all figured out, don't we? It's part of our culture, it's part of your thinking: You are the master of your own destiny. You can be whatever you want to be. Follow your dreams! Chart your own path. Be your own person. You do you! And the One enthroned in heaven laughs (Psalm 2). Only what God blesses will prosper. We are all just putty in God's hands. It doesn't matter if this doesn't fit with our ideas of personal choice, self-determination; the reality is our nation, our economy, our defense, our future, our health, our wealth—we are just putty in God's hands.

If we are putty in God's hands, if God is the Potter and we are the clay, then we are completely subordinate to God's direction and will. The pot cannot say to the potter, "I don't like how you made me or where you put me." In the same way we rest securely in the hands of God and trust his will. The pot cannot say to the potter, "You made me a boy, but I wish I were a girl. You made me an American, but I wish I would have been born somewhere else. You made me one race and ethnicity, but I wish I were a different race and ethnicity. You made me with this disability or these gifts, but I wish I things were different. We are who God has made us to be. We enjoy the blessings God has placed into our hands, and we bear the crosses God has laid on us to bear. To our sinful nature this can sound awful. I'm not in control of my own destiny? I can't chart my own course through life? I can't change who I am? My sinful nature says, "This is terrible! I have to be in control!" But when we know and recall that the Master Potter formed us to be exactly who he wants us to be, gave us what he wants us to have, blessed us according to his will, it's very comforting. We are putty in God's hands! We are secure in the hands of the God of all grace! The God who molded us, knitted us together in our mother's womb, created us according to his good and gracious will, is the same God who loved us and gave himself for us to rescue us from sin, death and hell. He is the same God who shed his blood on the cross for us to purchase us from slavery to Satan and slavery to self. He is the God of all grace, who works out all things for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. And he who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? I'm not in control? Praise God—because he is in control! I'm not in charge of my own life? Praise God—because the Master of my heart holds my life and my future in the palm of his gracious hand! We are putty in God's hands. What a great place to be!

Since today we celebrate the Festival of the Reformation of the Church, I'm going to tie in this text, because the Lord's illustration to Jeremiah about the potter and the clay gives us a beautiful example of how God charts the course of history for the good of his Church. At the beginning of the 1500s there were a lot of people who were clamoring for a reformation in the Roman Catholic Church. There was so much corruption, so much vice, so much oppression in the church, that many people saw the need for things to get cleaned up. But what ended up happening was something nobody saw coming. Nobody saw that God would use an obscure Augustinian friar named Martin Luther from some backwoods clearing in the forests of Germany called Wittenberg to reform the church—and even more, to completely transform Western Civilization. God the Potter did not raise up Martin Luther the lump of clay to reform the business or the outward organization of the church; he used him to reform the *teaching* of the church. The Roman Church controlled people and held them in bondage to fear by telling them that their relationship with God depended on what they did, how they behaved, and the church held the keys to purgatory for those who got out of line. Dr. Luther said, "That's not what the Bible says. It is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this is not from yourselves. It is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast." We are saved by grace alone. We cannot earn our way into God's graces; we simply trust that Jesus has paid the price for our sins and covered us in his perfect robe of righteousness. We are saved through faith alone. And if the Pope says something different, who cares? The decrees of Popes and councils can and have erred, but Holy Scripture never makes a mistake because it alone is the voice of God. We are saved by Scripture alone.

God used a lump of clay to set people free from bondage to fear, to liberate their consciences with the freedom of forgiveness. And as a result of the fundamental *teaching* being reformed and brought back in line with the Bible, civilization followed. We cannot overstate how the Lutheran Reformation completely transformed Western Civilization. Throughout the 1500s and 1600s the gospel of free grace swept across Western Europe and spilled over into the Americas; people were enlightened and set free. The understanding that every Christian has direct access to God through Jesus Christ and doesn't need to go through a priest or a saint to get to Jesus broke down barriers of hierarchy and classism and laid the foundation for democracy and government by the people. The understanding that nobody can force anyone else to believe laid the foundation for religious freedom; no more inquisition or religious oppression. All these things and so much more are gifts that we can so easily take for granted, but they're all rooted in the teaching of the Bible that we are right with God for Jesus' sake by grace alone, through faith alone, and by Holy Scripture alone. With the Lutheran Reformation, just like that, God

overturned one system of oppression and formed a civilization based on faith and freedom—like the potter reshaping his clay.

So here's the takeaway, friends; there are some important lessons here. First, when the gospel of freedom becomes a license for disobedience, tyranny and oppression soon follow. "Fear God and keep his commands, for this is the whole duty of man" (Ecclesiastes 12). God is the Potter; we are the clay. We are here to serve and obey God, not here to tell him what to do or tell him to be okay with our sin. Repent and believe the good news is the fundamental message of Jesus. Turn from sin; trust in Christ. Second, look at history and be amazed at what God has used to transform civilization. It's not new laws on the books, it's not secular leaders, it's the gospel of God's free grace that one by one sets free human hearts with free forgiveness and a right relationship with God in Christ and the promise of eternal life. That transformed the Roman world in the days of the apostles; it transformed Europe in the days of the Reformation. The good news of free forgiveness in Jesus is the only thing that God still uses today to change human hearts and bring souls to himself.

God is the Potter; we are the clay. What a great place to be! Amen.