

“One Lump’s Sum”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
September 4, 2022 – Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Jeremiah 18:1-11; Luke 14:25-33

Please pray with me: “O God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, and take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen”
(William Sloane Coffin).

In today’s first lesson from Jeremiah, Israel and Judah are depicted as a lump of clay in the hand of God the Potter. They were a community of people lovingly and carefully formed by the hand of God for the good purpose of serving God and blessing the world, but even as they were being formed and shaped on the Potter’s wheel, they resisted being worked by the hand of the Creator and became misshapen and unable to function for their intended purpose. They were made to be a community that worshipped their God alone and where all enjoyed justice, but, resisting God’s hand, they built altars and temples to the gods of their neighbors, and they did not create a just society, but one in which many of the few who were wealthy and powerful gained and grew their wealth and power at the expense of the many who were poor and in need. And so, because the God the Potter is faithful and steadfast in love, even when the lump of clay resists, the Potter did not give up or throw away the lump, but instead chose to rework it, taking it off of the wheel, smooshing it, and then placing it back, where it could again be turned and worked into something useful and beautiful.

The image offered to Judah through the prophet was intended to help them to see their need to willingly accept and not resist their formation by God and to live faithfully in righteousness as God intended and so avoid going down the path that would lead them to getting smooshed. It is an image that can help us in our own time as a community of faith, for God the Potter is still at the wheel, lovingly forming and reforming lumps of clay, that they might become more useful and beautiful. We as a church are such a lump in the hand of God.

But will we, as Israel and Judah so often were, be unwilling to accept the shape into which God forms us? Or will we allow God to work us and rework us into the good and useful shape of God’s choosing?

In today's gospel lesson from Luke, we are instructed by Jesus, along with the crowds that were following him as he traveled and taught, to place our whole lives, without reservation, in the hands of the Potter. As we've read in recent week's lessons from Luke, Jesus uses hyperbole to make this point, saying that being his disciples requires us to *hate* our loved ones, our possessions, and our very lives as we take up our cross, sacrificing all that we have and are for the sake of following Christ. While many followers of Christ over the centuries have failed to read poetic rhetorical devices poetically, instead taking them literally, causing harm to themselves and others in so doing, I don't believe that Jesus *literally* wants us to turn from our families or to despise or hurt ourselves. I do believe that Jesus is calling us to be *willing and prepared* to separate ourselves from those closest and most dear to us or to give up all that we own if needed as we prioritize being a follower of Christ and Christ's way above all else that concerns us.

And there is much that we always need to give up or reprioritize to be more faithful in following Christ. As a communal lump and as individual lumps of it, we are called to give up our prioritization of acquiring wealth and power. We are called to give up our idolization of "success." We are called to give up our fear and prejudice of others as they are. We are called to give these up as we are called to willingly place our whole selves in the Potter's active hands. The whole lump sum of the lump of clay that you are and the whole lump sum of the lump that we are is to be placed in God's care for God to shape and use -- and reshape and reuse -- according to God's design.

We are not called to cheap, convenient, half-hearted, or feel-good faith, or one that we hold so as to be rewarded by God with stuff; rather, we are called to a faith that requires us to give and has the high cost of total commitment. You, O Christian, are called to faithfully follow Christ, regardless of how you feel and no matter what you have to give or give up, even when the cost is the whole lump sum of the lump of clay that you are!

Will you put all of yourself, O lump of clay, into the Potter's hand to let God form you and reform you as God wills? Will we as a church willingly place ourselves as a communal lump onto God's wheel, letting God rework us into some form that is more useful and beautiful now? My prayer is that we would all be so willing, even

if it requires being smooshed, or etched, or formed into a shape that we don't immediately understand, or painted some color that seems strange or dull now, only to reveal its true glory later after undergoing the heat of a kiln's fire. May we be willing today, and may God make something good and beautiful from our lives and the life we share. Amen.