

“In the Hands of A Potter God”

Date: 10 June 2018

Text: Jeremiah 18: 1 – 6

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As you know, an exercise we did at our annual meeting raised up four main themes that you suggested can provide guidance for the future development of VAPC. We've been exploring those themes in recent weeks. Today we reflect on the last of them: faith formation. The wider church in recent years has returned to this ancient phrase to describe how we help people grow in maturity in faith. You have said that faith formation has always been core to the DNA of this congregation and you wish to build on that strength. The question is: how is faith formed? A wonderful image for this is found in our reading from Jeremiah. An image of forming: we are like clay being formed in the hands of a potter God.

Al Qoyawayma (ko-YAH-wy-mah) is a Native American potter, of the Hopi (Hoh-pee) people. He's an incredibly talented artist who takes plain, Arizona clay and works things of great beauty.

The images on the screen are of his work. He said, “The role of my art and life as an artist is to glorify God”. When he writes of his art, his words sound like that of Jeremiah. As I read Al Qoyawayma's words, imagine them as being spoken by God about us, God's creation. “The Potter breathes life into the lump of clay, and the clay says, “make me beautiful, make me what I am supposed to be...”. And so as the potter I talk to the clay at every step. The clay becomes a living being when I put it in my hand. At birth the clay is without form, and so... flexible. As I build my pot, a child begins to form... and like a child the pot is still pliable and not yet completely formed. I add more life-giving clay to my pot, and it grows. And as with the formative years of youth, I tug and pull at the clay, to provide the shaping that is so vital. As with life's path itself, some pots emerge with a struggle... and others with a smooth flow of energy”.

The description of his craft is as beautiful as his pottery. How Al describes the potter's work fits right into the analogy we find in Jeremiah about God's handiwork in our lives. God said to Jeremiah, “I can do with you what the potter does with clay”. The image is wonderful, for it suggests faith formation is primarily God's work. The clay doesn't decide what it should become – the Potter (God) does. Like all pottery, we are intended to be both useful and beautiful. We are to be the same in God's hands and in God's sight and in God's world.

In Jeremiah's words we also find a confession. In Jeremiah's vision, the potter is working intentionally at his wheel to create something specific out of formless clay. Yet despite all the potter's intentions and skill, the clay vessel being formed was not shaping up as intended. The potter was not able to compel the clay to take on the desired shape. Just as Al Qoyawayma wrote, “As with life's path itself, some pots emerge with a struggle... and others with a smooth flow of energy.” This is like us, growing in faith...being formed by God. But in Jeremiah we see the wonder of God's graciousness.

Rather than throw the clay away, the potter simply tries again to reform it into a vessel that seems good to him. So too the Holy Spirit works with us, always trying to shape us, to transform us into the image of Christ. I love this analogy, because I find it so comforting, and encouraging. It means that the formation of our faith is not simply left up to us alone, to determine how best to be a disciple. God is the potter and God continues to work on us...even at times despite us.

On Celebration Sunday we recognize the work of faith formation that happens in this congregation, particularly with our younger folk as they engage in church school and our youth ministry. In an organized way, programmed faith formation draws to a close as they leave the youth group, or complete communicant class, or perhaps after they grow too old to attend Canada Youth. There's a sense that we all "graduate" from our faith formation programs. We can easily assume that faith formation is just like the work of the potter as described by Al Qoyawayma: that in faith formation we too go through birth, childhood and the formative years of youth. But to the potter, youth ends when the clay vessel has taken on its final hoped-for shape. After that it is the *human* potter's desire that nothing more changes and that the clay object remain the same forever. We too easily assume the same: not only about our young members but also about ourselves.

The second century theologian Irenaeus encourages us to have a different view. As he put it this way in a poem:

It is not thou that shapest God
It is God that shapest thee.
If then thou are the work of God,
Await the hand of the Artist,
who does all things in due season.
Offer Him thy heart soft and pliable,
And keep the form in which the Artist has fashioned thee.
Let thy clay be moist, lest thou grow hard,
And lose the imprint of His fingers.

To me this is to be our essential attitude towards God: to remain moist clay in the hands of the one who would form us. It should be our orientation in worship and in the personal reflections we have on the life we live. To have the purpose and priority we hear echoed in Al Qoyawayma's words: "The Potter breathes life into the lump of clay, and the clay says, "make me beautiful, make me what I am supposed to be...". And what is that form? We move from a place where our faith is "just one aspect of our life" to a place where faith is core and influences all other aspects of our life. That form anticipates and recalls moments when we experience God. Desires the shaping influence of God's fingers so that how we live our lives gradually conforms more and more to Jesus. That form appreciates the challenge of the Christian life lived in our secular society, and yet has confidence to do so.

We keep our clay moist through spiritual practices. Regular worship. Daily prayer. Contemplating God's nature. Reflecting on our own nature. Thinking about what Christ-likeness looks like in our lives. It is about being attentive to the needs of our soul, in a society that can be so corrosive for the soul. These are life-long pursuits, and weekly in worship through our prayer of confession we acknowledge that we haven't arrived at the final destination. We never will. And the challenges of living today makes attending to our soul so important. The late Christian philosopher and spiritual writer Dallas Willard put it this way: "Our soul is like an inner stream of water, which gives strength, direction and harmony to every other element of our life. When that stream is as it should be we are constantly refreshed and exuberant in all we do, because our soul itself is profusely rooted in the vastness of God and God's kingdom, including nature; and all else within us is enlivened and directed by that stream." Jesus said, "I come to bring you a life-giving water, and if you partake of it you will not thirst again." Being receptive to this water keeps us moist, keeps our clay pliable for the forming, shaping work of God's fingers. As Irenaeus put it, "Let thy clay be moist, lest thou grow hard, and lose the imprint of God's fingers."

A growing priority for faith formation in our congregation will reflect these things. If we think this is a priority, then what do you think of participating in a Bible study group? What do you think of workshops on spirituality, or events to help us reflect on the intersection of church and society?

They will develop if we say like the clay says to the potter, "make me beautiful, make me what I am supposed to be!"

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