

1

It's been a long time since I made this pottery vase out of clay—probably some 50 years ago when I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade art class, learning the basics of making shapes from clay in Pottery 101. I formed the pot by rolling balls of clay into snake-like shapes, then weaving them into a vase shape. I added a small box to the side, creating a unique piece of art. I never imagined as a 7<sup>th</sup> grader that I would still have this object 50 years later, or that I would remember it as I read the story of the prophet Jeremiah who observed a potter making a shape on a potter's wheel.

The prophet Jeremiah lived during a difficult time in the history of God's people. Their neighbors to the north had been overtaken by the Assyrians, and now the Babylonians had come to power and had overtaken the rest of the land. Jeremiah was from a small village, but God invited him to bring words of hope to the people, along with challenging words to care for the oppressed. Jeremiah and many people were trying to understand why such devastation had come to their land, why such bad things had happened.

*Pottery 101*  
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Have you ever asked the question, "Why do bad things happen in the world?" Or maybe you've even wondered why bad things happen to you even when you try to live a good life. It's not an easy question to answer, but Jeremiah began to ponder the question while watching a potter make something from clay.

God invited Jeremiah to visit a potter's house for Pottery 101, and there the prophet observed a potter moving his hands in clay on a pottery wheel, forming an object. As Jeremiah watched the potter, he began to feel inspired, thinking about how God works with us like a potter works with clay.

The use of pottery was a very ancient practice. Since annual flooding of the Nile River brought silt and clay, it's natural that the ingredients became part of creation stories. In Egyptian mythology, the God Khnum is to have formed the first humans on the potter's wheel.

Those listening to Jeremiah speaking about a pottery wheel may have thought about the story from Genesis 2, where God formed humans from the clay of the earth and breathed life into us.

*Jeremiah 18:1-11*

2

Another prophet, Isaiah, compared God to a potter: “O Lord, you are our father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand” (64:8).

The invention of the pottery wheel made it possible to create objects faster by spinning the clay on a wheel and allowing one’s hands to shape the spinning clay into a pot. Fragments of a potter’s wheel have been found in city of Ur, modern-day Iraq, dating 3000 years before Jesus was born and also long before the prophet Jeremiah.

As Jeremiah watched the potter, the clay object being created didn’t come out quite right. So, the potter began reworking it into another shape. Jeremiah began to sense that this might be how God works, that when things go wrong in our lives, somehow God can reshape us.

Following the common understanding of his day, Jeremiah believed that God could destroy a nation that does not follow God’s ways, just as a potter could smash a clay creation. Jeremiah also believed that God was preparing to do evil against God’s people, threatening them to change their

ways. This may be how Jeremiah answered the question about why such bad things were happening to the people, that they had not followed God’s ways good enough and now God was destroying them.

I’m not sure about you, but I don’t have quite the same understanding of God, for I trust that God does not destroy or shape evil plans against us. I instead think of God as one who helps shape new possibilities. When life has smashed our hopes and dreams, God continues working in our lives, molding and shaping new opportunities. We may smash what God offers us, messing up the shape God has in mind for our lives, but God keeps the potter’s wheel spinning, reforming us, hoping to bring about something beautiful.

Writer Sue Bender thought about God’s creative process in our lives when she wrote about something she observed: a “strikingly handsome Japanese tea bowl that had been broken and pieced together. The image of that bowl made a lasting impression. Instead of trying to hide the flaws, the cracks were emphasized—filled with silver. The

3

bowl was even more precious after it had been mended.”<sup>1</sup>

It’s sometimes those struggles we’ve had in our lives that make us more compassionate, more understanding of the pain and suffering of others. Sometimes we become more able to listen to the turmoil of a friend’s life when we have faced it ourselves. God fills the cracks in our lives with grace, giving our pain and struggle a silver lining, making our lives more precious as God mends us.

We often face those times in life when we can’t reform ourselves, we can’t fill the broken places alone. That’s something Pastor Marti McDougal from Pomona, Kansas, learned from her son.

Her 5-year-old son Riley came running into the kitchen one day all full of excitement and discovery. A puzzle nut, he had just finished another of his puzzles when a “revelation” came to him.

“I figured it out, Momma!” he announced.

“What did you figure out?” his mother inquired.

“I figured out that you use your hands to put a puzzle together, and you use Jesus to put your heart together.”<sup>2</sup>

We may use our hands to put together puzzles, make clay vases in Pottery 101, or write a note to someone who needs cheering up. Our hands can do much good in the world through acts of kindness, but sometimes our world seems like it needs more than just our hands. When the world is filled with violence, political infighting, abuse, and environmental disasters, we may realize that we need more than just our hands to put the world together. That’s when we trust that God is still working in world, mending hearts through the grace of Christ. As the young boy putting together a puzzle realized, Jesus can put our hearts together, giving us hope to use our hands together to work on the puzzles of the world and offer God’s love.

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<sup>2</sup> "A Message from Marti," The United Methodist Messenger, 6 (May 1998), 1, as quoted on HomileticsOnline.

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<sup>1</sup> *Everyday Sacred* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 13, quoted on Homiletics Online, Sept. 6, 1998.