

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship
September 5, 2010
Anita Rediger

A Reworked Vessel

Upon moving to Indiana (29 years ago next Sunday), I discovered the reality of clay! Remember, I grew up on the edge of the Nebraska Sandhills. I was used to sand; the varieties of soil types found in a place like Adams County, Indiana were foreign to me.

My first spring in Indiana, I was anxious to try my hand at planting a garden. The arid climate of western Nebraska, the ubiquitous grasshoppers and the searing winds of summer makes gardening there a real challenge. So, I looked forward to the abundant rains of Indiana and wanted to see if I couldn't be a successful gardener. Well... I distinctly remember going to the place that seemed the most inviting for a garden – near the house, close to a water hydrant, etc. It was a bare spot already, as from time to time – believe it or not - the bull was kept there. ☹ It never dawned on me that the first thing needed would be a motorized tiller; no, I went to the garden spot with hoe in hand...only to discover to my dismay that the hoe was completely ineffective on this bare patch of soil. I hoed hard, but could not believe that the hoe actually *bounced* from the surface of the soil. I had become acquainted with Indiana clay! (Hence, another one of the times in which Martin found a young bride in tears...)

Clay...a valuable commodity for the crafting of ceramic vessels and sculpting but not for the growing of vegetables! This morning, Jeremiah – a prophet to the people of Judah – invites us to look over his shoulder as he goes down to a potter's house. His message is a serious challenge to the practice of faith of God's people of *that* day. It remains a serious challenge to those of us who claim to be God's people in *this* day.

Jeremiah is a persistent voice in the ear of the people of Israel. In addition to being persistent, his is also an *unwelcome* voice in the ear of the leaders of Judah; leaders who find a contractual relationship with empire builders more promising than a covenant relationship with God. Instead of relying on God for protection and guidance, the leaders created alliances with Egypt and Assyria. Instead of worshipping God alone, the people were encouraged to worship Baal and his many cohorts. Jeremiah was a voice calling for accountability of action and choices made by persons who claimed to be "God's People." They gave lip-service to being "God's People," but in practice they did not act justly, they oppressed the alien, the orphan and the widow and went after other gods." Jer. 7:5

Jeremiah's message was not about predicting a future over which the people had no control; rather Jeremiah's was a word of passionate appeal for reassessment and realignment of their values and practices. Jeremiah spoke serious words of warning, but he also shared words of hope and possibility. We're not doomed, he says. Instead, he laments the people's choices which have led them to this crossroads in their history. His call to the people is the word that we spoke together in our "call to worship." "Hear the choices God sets before us; life and prosperity or death and adversity..."

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Jeremiah's message recalls the words of the Mosaic book of Deuteronomy, "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways...then you shall live...choose life...loving the Lord your God, obeying him and holding fast to him...Deut 30:15ff. Jeremiah is saying, You/We can make a difference in the course of history!"

What does it look like to "walk in the ways of the Lord?" I hear God imploring of Jeremiah, "Say to my people, 'People of God...your actions matter much more than the doctrines you profess to believe. You are making a mockery of me if you say that you love me but then trample on others – others who are also precious to me, others who are also my beloved children. You have distorted my message and twisted it to serve your own interests and your own way of life. This is intolerable and must change. I'm serious...come with me and let me show you what I mean...'"

So, Jeremiah goes with the Lord to the Potter's House. "So I went down to the Potter's House, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand...and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him." This is a somber image...instead of time of expectancy and marvel over a beautiful, new creation...Jeremiah sees the potter slumped with the frustration of a spoiled pot in hand. A disappointing time, yet it is also a time of possibility; it is a time for starting over...

For Jeremiah, he saw a spoiled pot – a sad reality, but not a reality without possibility for the future...the clay itself will not be discarded, no matter even if it needs to be badly reworked. The current pot is spoiled, but the clay remains in the steady hands of the diligent potter.

At the time of Jeremiah, this symbol of the spoiled pot is the people of Israel. As was shown to Jeremiah, the potter desired to rework the clay, just as God desired to rework the faith community of his day. What about our experience as followers of Jesus today?

With the image of the potter and the clay on the wheel vivid in our minds, let's imagine the "people of God 2010," the church, as the vessel on the potter's wheel. Last week's Sojourners discussion was exciting for me. We allowed ourselves to ask rather "dangerous" questions about being church. We asked ourselves and one another...such things as,

1. What does it mean to be "committed" to Jesus?
2. Not what does this "sound like," but what does this "look like!"

3. What makes us hesitant to follow the commandment of Jesus...to love the Lord and our neighbors as ourselves?
4. What “shape” is the church taking? Is the church becoming cozy with the dominant American culture...and if so, is the church even aware of it?

This morning, I encourage us to continue working with these queries – why?

1. It’s nothing new that the people of God drift away from God’s original vision of a blessed creation....so why couldn’t it happen to us if we’re not paying attention? From the earliest scriptures – the record of Abraham and Sarah – we read that the people of God were “chosen,” that is “set aside” for special responsibility to be the people through which all peoples, all nations of the world would receive blessing. But, again and again, God’s covenant of fidelity and vision was battered by the human tendency to capitulate to the lure of violence and fear. Through the words of Jeremiah, God laments, “My people have forgotten me, they burn offerings to a delusion; they have stumbled in their ways...and have gone into bypaths...making their land a horror...” “They say, we will follow our own plans...” Jer. 18:12ff
2. Might it be that today’s American church is the vessel that is on the potter’s wheel? Is it too strong to say that in many ways, the Christian church in the USA has become “spoiled?” Is it an unwillingness to be reworked which results in it being “marred.” What about the church needs reworking?
3. What might a reworked vessel look like? What do we envision the vessel of the church looking like in our time – if it is as “seems good to God?” What might it mean for us – right here, in this time to offer ourselves, our Fellowship and our denomination as clay willing to be “reworked into this vessel?” Are we willing to offer ourselves for reshaping? And to be surprised & delighted at what emerges?
4. Might this mean a “reworking” of our image of God, our understanding about the Bible, a serious consideration about the way we understand the relationship of our Christian faith with that of others?
 - Editorial from *Tri-Weekly News* in August, 2010– re: Muslims

- *Someone sent me an email that showed the back end of a pickup truck. The entire tailgate of this truck was covered by a painting that showed the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. The one tower was already in flames, and the second tower was engulfed by a fireball...Remember that day? Above the picture of the towers was caption that said, “Everything I need to know about Islam I learned on 9/11*

In contrast, Ted Grimsrud, in his recent book, *Theology as if Jesus Matters*, (Ted – Prof of Theology and Peace Studies at Eastern Mennonite University and member of Shalom Mennonite – A CDC congregation in Harrisonburg, VA) writes, “Our task is not to focus on boundary lines that separate us from other religions. Rather, our task is to witness to the ways of peace to bring healing to the nations....Christians,

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especially American Christians, are all too often a *curse* to the families of the earth, not a blessing. Christians all too often *fuel* warfare rather than teaching against it. Christians all too often *benefit from* the building of swords and spears rather than transforming them into plowshares and pruning hooks...Christians all too often *reject* strangers rather than welcome them...all too often *privatize* water supplies rather than give water to the thirsty...These kinds of things are possible when we do theology as if Jesus does not matter, as if love of neighbor is something optional...at most an add-on after we get our basic doctrine right.” (p.179)

- Our friend, Mark Strietlemeier, from the Zion Lutheran Church in Portland writes in his September church letter, “Some today...act as though the Christian message is aimed at forcing our point of view on others...Christian faith is not imperial...we serve. Jesus came into the world to serve and so we serve...and from the earliest days until now, when the church followed Jesus the way Jesus wanted, we helped others and served them according to their needs....

Work in the clay is messy...it’s hard...clay is very resistant to change! But God is determined – out of love for the world – to shape us as communities of healing and hope. God so loved the world...that he gave us Jesus, so that as we believe and live in his way, none should perish.

Last week, our brother, Don Blosser shared a message with the College Mennonite Church, Goshen based on the words of yet another prophet of yet another time – Zechariah – This time *following* the people’s exile instead of prior to it, Zechariah invited the people into what Don describes as “do-over.” As Don noted last week, “God has offered us an opportunity to “do it over.” In today’s metaphor God offers to “reshape us...to re-form us” “God has offered us an opportunity to “do it over” – to start again, to redo our theology, to recover God’s vision for humanity and how we live together.”

Again and again, our loving, persistent God calls us to be malleable and open to the leading of the potter’s hand. Over and over – from one generation to the next, we are invited to be vessels which share the living water of God’s message of healing and hope to all of creation.

May our ways of worship *and* our ways of life bear witness to the redemptive purposes of God; practicing forgiveness, breaking the silence about matters of justice, intending compassion over self-interest and welcoming the stranger with true hospitality. May our lives be evidence of the promise of the resurrection to new life as given to us by Jesus. And may we remember – this life comes to us a gift of the Spirit. Again and again- over and over- as we offer ourselves...our “jars of clay” into the potter’s hand, may we be reworked as our Creator seems right...

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Psalm 139 Vs. 1: “O Lord, you have searched me and known me...

Vs.23: “Search me/us, O God, and know my/our heart; test me/us and know my/our thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me/us, and lead me/us in the way everlasting.”

Psalm 119 Vs 41: Let your love, God shape my life with salvation.

Vs 73: Your hands have made and fashioned me; give my understanding that I may learn your commandment. (Greatest command...Love the Lord...& neighbor as self)