

“Down To The Potter’s House”

Jeremiah 18:1-11

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD:

“Come, go down to the potter’s house,
and there I will let you hear my words.”

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.

Then the word of the LORD came to me:

Can I not do with you, O house of Israel,
just as this potter has done? says the LORD.

Just like the clay in the potter’s hand,
so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom,
that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it,
but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken,
turns from its evil, I will change my mind
about the disaster that I intended to bring on it.

And at another moment I may declare
concerning a nation or a kingdom
that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight,
not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind
about the good that I had intended to do to it.

Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah
and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD:
Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you
and devising a plan against you.

Turn now, all of you from your evil way,
and amend your ways and your doings.

Down To The Potter's House

Jeremiah 18:1-11

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I.

This morning we are going down to the Potter's house. Rather than ring the bell at the front of the house, however, we are going to go around and knock on the back door. I cannot remember where it was, exactly. It was almost certainly a parishioner's home I was visiting. Who, in specific, I could not venture to guess. I just remember the sign that said, "Backdoor Guests Are The Best." Which sort of says it all in a down-home kind of way. The front entrance to just about every house almost always presents better in a superficial kind of way; with flowers on the little table, a nice rug and a fancy light fixture. Going around to the backdoor, however, brings a much different perspective.

II.

The backdoor is where you find the steps worn down to bare wood, the lead for the dog laying on the porch with peeling paint, the recycling bins, the pots planted with herbs, the clothesline and the bird food bin. Very rarely is there a door bell, mostly you just knock and walk on in. Inside the backdoor a mass of empty shoes and boots reside, there are hooks over-burdened by coats, the leash, the poop bags, the food and water bowls, and pantry shelves stocked with cans and dry goods. Depending on the time of year there is mud, grass, or ice melt footprints on the floor. While the front door may be the face of a house the backdoor leads to the heart of a home. Depending on which entrance you use, you'll gain a very different perspective of what is inside; and, on the lives of those who live there.

III.

I bring this up to you today because I recently had the realization that though I may *eventually* get around to showing you the front door of the scripture reading on any given Sunday, what interests *me* most is inviting you to enter the text by way of the backdoor as it almost always yields a more insightful perspective on the passage; which, I would argue, proves to be much

more instructive to us in our faith journey as we stroll around this Biblical neighborhood of ours.

For instance, if we walk into today's reading from Jeremiah chapter 18 by way of the front door we find a prophet living in the late 5th century BCE warning the people of Judah and Israel that if they didn't abandon their evil ways and return to God, some pretty terrible things would befall them. In spite of this, the people did not change and, eventually, they were conquered by the Babylonians; with the whole of God's chosen people taken away into exile where they languished for almost 70 years.

IV.

Looking at our sermon text with a front door perspective, we can plainly see what God was trying to show Jeremiah by leading him down to the Potter's house where he witnessed a potter reworking a new vessel from one which had spoiled in her hands. The message is clear: God's people are like clay in a Potter's hands. God can choose to build us up or break us down depending on our decision to amend our ways and our doings. So, God uses Jeremiah to tell the people to get their act *to-geth-er*; ultimately, we are going to be held accountable to God. In many ways, what Jeremiah discovered by his trip down to the Potter's house is not necessarily all that comforting: yes, God can make us, but God can also break us.

V.

If we enter today's scripture reading by way of the front door we get a pretty straightforward view of what is inside: an exacting homeowner who doesn't take kindly to tracking mud into the house, jumping on the furniture or disrespecting the other guests whom God has also invited over. Moreover, if we break the house rules we shouldn't be surprised to find ourselves being shown the door and getting kicked to the curb. I think we all can agree that this is an important lesson to learn, and the kind of line-in-the-sand warning which we would do well to heed. That said, I also think such an interpretation is fairly straightforward and plain-Jane. While a reminder and reiteration certainly never hurts, I'm not sure this is the kind of thing for which you necessarily need to wake up early on a Sunday morning and come to church to hear. More to the point, it isn't the kind of thing I feel a great need to say after 25 years into my pastorate with you.

VI.

Instead, what I'd like to do is bid you welcome to today's scripture reading by way of the *backdoor*. Staying with our metaphor, what if you were a guest in God's house only to find yourself beset and beleaguered by others in the house whom God had also invited in? Beyond common courtesy, a degree of forbearance would also be offered, if not expected, out of some mix of gratitude to the host and graciousness toward the other guests. Given enough time, however, the continued inappropriate behavior of the offending guests begins to reflect poorly on the host as well; and, perhaps, even more so. If it is the case, as Jeremiah so clearly observed, that God is like the Potter who can rework the vessel as seems good, those in the house being taken advantage of by others in the house might rightly ask, "What's taking so long?"

VII.

Last Sunday, in my one allotted fish sermon per summer, I told you that after a several year hiatus I got my fanny back into my fishing boat. This week, that same fanny got handed to me by my wife, daughter and son. Sunday night during dinner, we started talking about the situation at the Christian Fellowship Center which has been much in the local news of late. For those of you who do not know, it seems the pastor became aware of the egregious transgressions of a parishioner toward his daughters, but chose not to report or disclose this information. While the pastor is correct that there is no *legal* mandate in New York State to do so, there certainly is a *moral* mandate, not to mention a *pastoral imperative*.

However, it is the larger theological and ecclesiastical context of that male-biased community which is most troubling. Quoting now from a recent news article: (there are) "a variety of allegations ranging from cult-like behavior, domestic abuse, physical abuse, spiritual abuse and sexual abuse."

VIII.

This certainly is an *extremely* troubling situation, in general, but particularly so for those of us who are at home in a faith community and understand those here with us to be our church family. For far too long this type of thing has been much too easily and often swept under the rug. It is something we need to talk about and be diligent in preventing. To that point, this past Monday night we took time at the Session meeting to do just that.

We talked about the importance of our connectional form of church government which stresses shared leadership, mutual accountability and the need to appropriately limit the scope of the pastor's power and responsibilities. Implicit in all of this is both the propriety and importance of having women in leadership roles in the our church. Be assured that here on the Park, we are *always* going to be honest with ourselves, and to talk honestly amongst ourselves.

IX.

In discussing all of this with my wife, daughter and son around the dinner table, I expressed my bewilderment at why people remain in a situation such as the one which is apparently occurring at CFC; that is, in an abusive relationship and/or an abusive community. To them, this sounded an awful lot like me blaming the victim; which I suppose I was, though I wouldn't necessarily express it that way.

After some back and forth they helped me to see that I orient to the world in a specific way: as a big man and former football player with a no-holds-barred, this or that, don't really give two figs kind of temperament. Planting a flag and making a stand is something that comes naturally and somewhat easily to me. They also helped me to realize that for many others, such resolve is much harder to muster; particularly those who are socially isolated, economically vulnerable or simply do not possess the same sheer physical size.

X.

While I knew all of this at an *intellectual* level, I will admit, being compelled by those I love and respect to really see myself and my world from *their* perspective was an eye opener. It was the difference between entering a house from the backdoor for the first time after only ever using the front door: I got a completely different view on things. A different view on my life, my profession, what other people are made to endure, and the challenges they must face.

It also gave me a different perspective on today's scripture reading, and what it must be like to sit trapped in a house with others who mistreat you and regard you as less. Surely they must wonder if it is the case that God is trying to *break* them? Because if God is trying to *make* them, God sure is taking God's sweet time. If God has the power to rework us like a pot in the hands of a Potter, what, exactly, is taking so long?

XI.

The front door interpretation of today's scripture reading from Jeremiah is one of warning and rebuke: "turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings" or God can and will rework you to what *God* deems to be good. As the people of Judah and Israel can attest having lived in exile for 70 years, *that* is something to be avoided at all costs.

The backdoor interpretation of the same text holds that if we turn from evil, our own evil and the evil of others, we have the power not only to change God's mind but to change our own lives as well. Whenever we find ourselves in a hard place longing for our lives to be reworked into something deemed "good," it is only natural to wonder what is taking God so long? Another question we might ask, though, is why is it taking so long for *us* to deem that what our life has become is *not* so good?

XII.

At the risk of again sounding like I'm blaming the victim, it would seem that in today's text the message Jeremiah received is this: if we are to change the mind of God, we must begin by changing our own minds and amend our own ways and our own doings. Which, to be fair, is no easy task. Especially when a person is socially isolated, economically vulnerable, or has been made to feel so small for so long that any form of reworking by the Potter simply seems out of the realm of possibility. It is this perceived lack of possibility, though, that has me so bewildered, as I believe that *each* of us has the power to rework our own lives, and to be reworked by the hands of God.

XIII.

Though I used different words, I essentially said as much to my daughter last weekend. Yes, she said, but for many people such a possibility has been hidden, stolen or spirited away, and they don't have someone in their lives to show them it exists. As we leave from here today, let's go down to our neighbor's house to proclaim the possible. Rather than ring the bell at the front of the house, however, let's go around and knock on the back door. Amen.