

## P13C 2022 Jeremiah 18:1-11

About 15 years ago I received a pottery mug as a gift from my boss. For each member of our team, she had picked a different mug—different shapes, sizes, and colors—from the shop of a local potter. Since then, I've bought several of his pieces for myself and to give as gifts, because I think his work is so beautiful and durable—I've never broken anything he's made. Once I took a group of art students to his shop to see a demonstration of each step of the creation process: working the clay, throwing it on the wheel, adding handles to the semi-dried pieces, firing the clay, glazing it and firing it again to make it decorative and food-safe. So every time I read today's passage from Jeremiah, I envision Mark in his shop making dinnerware; but if we read closely, we'll notice the last few steps of the process are missing from the analogy of the Lord as the Potter: we never hear about the vessel being fired or glazed—in other words, we never hear that the piece is finished.

Like all of the prophets, Jeremiah's job was not fortune telling but speaking to the people on God's behalf, including judgment for how they were abandoning God's covenant. Ancient Israel understood current events as God's punishment or reward for their behavior, but it's better to think of the prophets warning the people of natural consequences as opposed to threatening God's arbitrary punishment. Think of it less like putting an unruly toddler in time-out or grounding a defiant teenager and more like a child's bike that was left out in the driveway getting stolen or a driver running a red light and getting hit in the intersection. Through the prophets, God warned Israel of the logical consequences of violating the Law, which was, after all, meant to help them build a strong community: God told them not to worship other gods, because the neighboring religions demanded horrible practices like child sacrifice; but the people worshipped other gods anyway and lost their children. The Law required justice and provision for the less fortunate; but the wealthy ignored the needs of the poor, causing the prophets to accuse them of lounging on their ivory couches while widows, orphans, and aliens starved. God tried to tell them what to do and what *not* to do to keep their society from collapsing in on itself; but the people ignored God, thereby weakening their own community. They became easy targets for neighboring nations; their enemies didn't have to divide and conquer—Israel had already divided itself for them.

The thing about the prophets is that, strictly speaking, they're never successful. Faced with warnings of impending consequences, Israel still never repents. The only story of repentance is the book of Jonah, which is satire, and isn't a story about Israel at all. Jonah

narrates the repentance of Nineveh—the capital city of Israel’s enemies the Assyrians; in that story, Israel’s heathen neighbors repent—from the king on down, every single citizen of the largest city in the world—and by doing so, they change God’s mind and avoid destruction. But Israel, God’s own chosen people, never make that change.

And yet, God never gives up on the people. It certainly looks like God runs out of patience and smites them, but if we look at the bigger picture, we see that’s not the whole story. We tend to read the prophets as if they are speaking directly to individuals: *I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans for a hope and a future...* we hear that and think about what God intends specifically for our own lives. But in context, the prophets are almost always speaking to all of God’s people together—the whole community. *I know the plans I have for y’all, declares the Lord...* So the calamity that befalls some of the people will, to them, seem permanent; but God is playing the long game. The Israelites who first hear the prophets’ warnings suffer the consequences of their unrepentant behavior; they are invaded and conquered; the rulers are exiled and never see Jerusalem and the Temple again. But the prophets’ promise of restoration is also true; the exile ends, and a new generation of the people of Israel returns to the promised land.

God keeps working on the people the way the potter works on an unfinished lump of clay. In Jeremiah’s story, the vessel was spoiled but the potter reworked it and tried again to form it into a vessel *that seemed good*—to the vessel? No, *that seemed good to the Potter*. We can get a little too enamored of our own shape sometimes; we don’t want to change, we don’t want to repent even when it is clear that we are in the wrong; but there’s a reason God hasn’t put us in the kiln and declared us a final product just yet. Human progress is a slow and unfinished business; whether we are ready to admit it or not, there is still so much in us personally and in the systems of our world at large that needs to be redeemed and reworked into something that more closely fits the vision of the Creator. Where we find hope is not in trying to become and to remain a certain perfect vessel; our hope lies in being God’s precious raw material; we might get painfully reshaped, but we’re never going to get thrown out. Jeremiah *never* describes the potter’s work being finished in the fire, and that’s us, too—never done, but never abandoned. May we pay better attention to the prophets’ words than our ancestors did, and may we be open to the work of the Good Potter who never gives up on making us useful, and beautiful, and purposeful, and good.