

Prayer for Illumination

Lord, allow our ears to be open to your Word, especially where there are questions or challenges. Allow us to be open to where you are speaking to us in our discomfort.

Jeremiah 18:1-11

18 Jeremiah received the LORD's word: **2** Go down to the potter's house, and I'll give you instructions about what to do there. **3** So I went down to the potter's house; he was working on the potter's wheel. **4** But the piece he was making was flawed while still in his hands, so the potter started on another, as seemed best to him. **5** Then the LORD's word came to me: **6** House of Israel, can't I deal with you like this potter, declares the LORD? Like clay in the potter's hand, so are you in mine, house of Israel! **7** At any time I may announce that I will dig up, pull down, and destroy a nation or kingdom; **8** but if that nation I warned turns from its evil, then I'll relent and not carry out the harm I intended for it. **9** At the same time, I may announce that I will build and plant a nation or kingdom; **10** but if that nation displeases and disobeys me, then I'll relent and not carry out the good I intended for it. **11** Now say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem: This is what the LORD says: I am a potter preparing a disaster for you; I'm working out a plan against you. So each one of you, turn from your evil ways; reform your ways and your actions.

Luke 14:25-33

25 Large crowds were traveling with Jesus. Turning to them, he said, **26** "Whoever comes to me and doesn't hate father and mother, spouse and children, and brothers and sisters—yes, even one's own life—cannot be my disciple. **27** Whoever doesn't carry their own cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

28 "If one of you wanted to build a tower, wouldn't you first sit down and calculate the cost, to determine whether you have enough money to complete it? **29** Otherwise, when you have laid the foundation but couldn't finish the tower, all who see it will begin to belittle you. **30** They will say, 'Here's the person who began construction and couldn't complete it!' **31** Or what king would go to war against another king without first sitting down to consider whether his ten thousand soldiers could go up against the twenty thousand coming against him? **32** And if he didn't think he could win, he would send a representative to discuss terms of peace while his enemy was still a long way off. **33** In the same way, none of you who are unwilling to give up all of your possessions can be my disciple.

people of pottery

So, these are kinda intense passages of scripture. I am going to lean hard into the first testament on this one, but I do want to mention the connections to the second testament passage.

It feels counter to everything Jesus has told us before now, right? When the gospel passages up to now have said that we're meant to love people, truly love and support our neighbors just like we would love ourselves... Suddenly, we see the very counterintuitive call that if we *don't* hate our family, even hate ourselves, we can't be a disciple of Christ. I want to be clear, in using this phrasing, Christ is making it abundantly clear that this will not be easy. This process isn't just going to happen. You can't just wander into this crowd of people and figure everything out on a whim and hope for the best. It is going to take *work*. Jesus is talking to a crowd of people. How many do we think just wandered over thinking they would join this new fad of following Jesus... he seems like a cool guy, probably more fun than sitting around, so we'll figure it out later! Right? Well, Jesus is making this clear, this will not be an easy process, this will not be a fad that you do for a while then fad out when things get kinda boring. The work of following Christ, and intentionally loving humanity is *hard work*. It will not be fashionable, it will not be fun and bubbly... it will be difficult. You will get persecuted. You will have your boundaries and your edges pushed and pulled, you will be built into something that you didn't expect, and it will be beautiful, but it will be hard getting there. This is not a decision to make lightly and follow along for kicks and giggles.

Speaking of difficult things... have yall ever thrown pottery?

If you're used to looking at our communion table up here, you'll notice some new things, and some things that look kinda different than a "normal" month. There are quotes around that because we know "normal" never actually happens in ministry. But- there are new things here! Let's take a look...

This is how clay starts. It is sticky, it is messy, it is wet. These are all sensations that I fundamentally hate touching... so, why is it a task I have fallen in love with?? Because when it's *not* in those early stages, when you've build something out of literal mud, that is a spiritual thing. It truly feels magical. So, we reach the next stage. This clay is now the most brittle it can possibly be. It is, at best, very loosely held-together dirt. But! It is held together. This clay will not suddenly turn back into the mud without some outside force being applied- such as water or actual force. Then, you'll see this stage, this clay has gone through something that we wouldn't survive. This clay has been through temperatures of between 1650-1940°F. Now, I know this summer has been HOT. and while it has often *felt* like it's 1500° outside, I assure you, it has not been. We would quite literally melt. This clay has changed chemically, fundamentally, into a different thing than it was just a few moments ago in a wet, sticky, lump. And finally, at least for our discussion, the last step is encasing this lovely chemically changed dirt in glass and pretty colors! This is another firing, at a shocking roughly 2300°, has changed powered color and silica into actual glass. Again, a reminder, we wouldn't survive what this clay has gone through to get to this stage.

God has taken humanity, originally lumps of clay, pulled from the earth, spirit breathed, and created beautiful pieces. But, we didn't get here easily. And truly, you may not feel like a perfectly glazed pot yet. That's okay. You may still feel like a sticky lump of mud that is a little

unpleasant to deal with. You may feel so fragile that you might shatter at the lightest touch. You may feel fundamentally changed by a past experience, something that changed your very essence. And luckily, for humans, we can change between these states of feeling freely. We aren't *actual* clay- which once it has been fired once can't ever go back to the mud.

God is a potter. God is sitting at this wheel, trying desperately to shape and mold humanity into a beautiful thing. Being a potter is a little frustrating sometimes. In college, I was taking ceramics as a part of the curriculum and I learned in a very late studio session, that my hands no longer function to throw clay after 11:00 pm. No matter how much I try or sit at a wheel. It's just not going to happen. Clay also has a tendency to comment on your own emotional state. Centering is a process at the very beginning of throwing that you have to put your whole body into a static spot and push the clay into that spot with you. This creates a literally centered piece of mud. However, if you're "off kilter"-- maybe you're angry at a friend, maybe you're exhausted, maybe you're just having a truly horrible day-- that centering is very likely going to be much more difficult at best and absolutely not happen at worst. I imagine God centering humanity and having to have a centered mindset and clear intentions first.

Then, humanity is shaped, pushed and pulled into different directions, sometimes thinner areas, sometimes bubbles have to be pushed out, sometimes there can be a moment of flow that the clay just moves *correctly*. This clay has is pulled, pushed, aligned in such a way that it grows and becomes *something*. God has shaped humanity and because of this, we're a beautiful thing shaped and created. We're not just a pile of sticky mud. There has been work put in.

So, what about when something goes wrong? The second half of our first testament passage isn't easy to read. It may feel difficult to understand and quite harsh to read from a loving God. The text says, "This is what the LORD says: I am a potter preparing a disaster for you; I'm working out a plan against you. So each one of you, turn from your evil ways; reform your ways and your actions." God is saying very clearly, if we don't get it together, God will absolutely scrap the plan. We will be squished into a ball once again, and we will be reshaped whether we want to be or not. Sometimes, when I'm throwing, a piece will just not be working. It could be for any number of reasons, not centered, too thin, too tall, not tall enough, too little clay for what my brain wants to do... whatever it is... sometimes it will just-- unprompted-- fall. When this happens, you OFTEN hear "NO!" from across the studio. And don't worry- there's definitely never a curse word yelled instead. But this piece has fallen, there is nothing to do at that point except to re-ball up the clay, rework it from the very first step of being mud, until it can get to the finished point. That is the experience God is telling humanity to prepare for.

Judah, in this passage, and sometimes- looking around- I believe our current state of humanity, are told, "You're skating on thin ice. If you keep going, I will absolutely not hesitate to restart. I can ball you up, I can reduce you to mud once again, and I can start again. Get it together." I've told my own pottery that same thing many times, because sometimes talking to the mud seems to help it remember that you're in charge.

The work that God is putting us through is not easy, it will not be fun and bubbly all the time. It's not work that we go through for kicks and giggles. It will take intentional work. And

still, God will be present the whole time. God will be reworking our very beings, God will be fundamentally changing us. Until we reach this final form, beautiful pieces of true art.

Please pray with me.