

Title: Where Do We Start From?

Date: 9/4/2022 (Proper 18, Year C)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Jeremiah 18:1-11](#); [Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17](#); [Philemon 1-21](#); [Luke 14:25-33](#)

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/CeTiAFGOAyg?t=1230>

Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts.

Amen

How many of you have ever watched the show “The Great Pottery Throwdown?”

This is a show that I wouldn't have normally watched, but I spent a lot of time at home during the pandemic.

What I learned is that being a potter is tough. In the first episode, the potters spent FOUR days to create five stackable kitchen bowls from scratch.<sup>1</sup>

First, the potters throw the bowls on the pottery wheel. They throw wet clay on the center of a moving wheel. Then they mold it AS the wheel continues to turn. It's SO amazing to watch.

After they get the shape they want, they carefully remove the bowls from the wheel.

They put them in the drying room and leave them there until the surface is leather hard.

Then the potter puts the bowls back on the wheel. With various tools, they trim bits off the bowls to shape them and add texture.

Then the bowls are fired in the kiln. For 24 hours, the potters pray that nothing cracks, or falls, that the temperature stays steady at around 2000 degrees, that there is the right amount of oxygen to trap the right amount of carbon.

After the bowls cool, the potters paint them with glaze. Unlike normal painting, the colors they see in front of them may not be the colors they end up with. Next, they dip the bowls in a bucket of glaze, which seem to cover them in white paint, hoping the colors have dried enough that they won't run.

Then the bowls go BACK into the kiln, for ANOTHER 24 hours.

Once the bowls are cool, at long last the potters can present their final product to the judges.

The first fragments of pottery we know about date to roughly 20,000 years ago.<sup>2</sup> The pottery wheel was invented about 6,000-8,000 years ago.<sup>3</sup>

The technology and tools for making pottery have changed since,  
but the rough outline of that process has stayed the same.

I've walked through the process in **such detail** to show that when Jeremiah talks about a potter working at his wheel,

he is watching someone at the first stage of a very long process.

If something goes wrong with that initial vessel,  
there is not much the potter can do in the later stages to fix it.

So, he reworks the clay in his hands  
as soon as he can tell that it has been spoiled.

This highlights the importance of starting well.

Having a good and healthy foundation is crucial, and the foundation we build on is shaped by

the family we were born into,  
the schools we went to,  
the churches, the scouts, and other groups we were part of,  
the places we work at.

Together, they all shape our thoughts, words, and deeds.

The stories they tell,  
the examples they hold up as models of excellence and success  
ends up shaping who we are,  
how we think,  
what we do,  
how we react.

To know whether we are building on a good and healthy foundation, we must be aware of the basic principles

and subtle scripts  
that guide our everyday life.

Unfortunately, not everyone is blessed with good and healthy foundations. For some of us, we don't realize that some of those principles and stories were flawed.

Either they've never served as well,  
or they no longer serve us well.

Fortunately, human beings are more flexible than pottery.

Or at least, we have the **potential** to be.

After all, we are made in the image of God,  
and our God is a flexible and responsive God.

By flexible, I don't mean anything goes,  
and God will let us do anything we want.

By flexible, I mean God can choose  
to NOT pluck up and break down a nation  
if the people have turned from evil,  
and God can choose  
NOT to build and plant a nation  
if the people have turn towards evil.

Similarly, once we realize we are going in a direction that is not good,  
once we recognize we have turned away from God,  
we can choose to turn back.

As God reminds us through Jeremiah,  
we can always choose to turn *now*,  
and amend our ways and our doings (Jer 18:11).

Oftentimes, this verse portraying God as potter and humans as clay focuses on the individual person.

The lyrics to “You are the Potter I am the Clay” include lines such as, “Lord, You are the Potter and I am the clay/Mold me and make me, have Thine own way/Lord, I need Your Spirit, I need Your grace;/Help me to run this Christian race.”<sup>4</sup>

This desire to surrender to the divine is beautiful.

At the same time, it is important to remember that Jeremiah is talking to the people of Israel as a nation,

as a kingdom,  
not as individuals.

So, this is not so much about asking God to “mold me and make me” as it is asking God to “mold **us** and make **us**.” We are **all of us** part of this vessel in the potter’s hands. This is about the way we relate to and care for each other, in the context of following God and being God’s people.

In Paul’s letter to Philemon, he makes an appeal to him on behalf of Onesimus based on this idea,

that changing the way we relate to God  
changes the way we relate to each other.

The bonds between us are reconfigured, molded, if you will.

Onesimus was a slave in Philemon’s household. He was in prison either because he stole something, or because someone accused him of stealing something. In prison, he met Paul and converted to Christianity. Given that Philemon is not just a dear friend of Paul’s but a co-worker in the work of Christ, this changes Philemon and Onesimus’ relationship from master and slave to **brothers**.

Paul points out that he can make a case that Philemon needs to accept Onesimus back into his household

because he is bound to do so as a prisoner of Christ;  
this is the duty of one who is ruled by Christ.

But he would **rather** appeal to Philemon on the *basis of love*,  
reminding him that his love of the saints  
must also include this former slave,

that the joy and encouragement he offers to Paul  
must also be directed towards Onesimus.

Paul says he is willing to repair wrongs and repay debts if that’s what it takes. AND he gently tweaks Philemon.

“I say nothing about **your** owing me even your own self!”  
Sometimes, it can be easier to think about  
what is owed us  
than what we ourselves owe.

It can be easier to calculate how much someone else benefits

than to recognize and remember how much **we** have benefited.

When we make a calculation from God's point of view, it's not so much about how we are going to be impacted as individuals. It's more about how we are going to be impacted as a whole, as a people.

In today's reading from the gospel, Jesus talks about estimating costs. He uses as his examples a man building a tower and a king waging war.

Last week he sounded like Miss Manners,  
this week he's offering sound financial planning.  
He's making a case for balanced budgets  
and well-thought-through business plans, right?

Yet his conclusion is, "So therefore none of you can become my disciples if you do not give up all your possessions."

**It kind of feels like Jesus took a sharp turn at the end there.**

But when we read the earlier verses through this lens, perhaps he's reminding us that we shouldn't hold on so tightly to the boundaries we draw as individuals. This is MY money. These are MY things.

I only care about my family, the people I'm related to by blood.  
My priority is my safety and comfort;  
I don't want to get involved  
in what people call politics and make waves.

Jesus' criticism of the man building the tower  
may not be about leaving a project unfinished. Sometimes a pandemic hits and the cost of material and labor skyrockets!

But perhaps making a plan will lead him to ask himself  
why he's building it in the first place.

I wonder if the others are ridiculing him  
because it was a vanity project,  
so they delighted in his misery  
when things ended badly.

Perhaps he could have directed that manpower and money  
to a different use.

Jesus' criticism of the king going to war  
may not be about encouraging him to stop  
and calculate his odds of victory  
based on the relative size of their armies.

Perhaps the king needs to stop and be honest with himself  
about **why** he is going to war.

Is it really for the benefit of his people?  
Or is he doing it out of pride, or anger, or greed?

This decision can't just be about him; it has to be about his people and his land.

Before we talk about the cost of any given policy, such as forgiving student loans, repairing the water treatment plant in Jackson, MS, immigration and refugees, and taking steps to slow down climate change, before we try to find the best deals on food, clothing, furniture and so on, let us consider the foundation of our framework.

The foundation God gives us

asks us to focus less on the cost to us as individuals,  
and more on the cost to us as a people, as a planet.

The foundation God gives us asks us to treat **everyone** as our beloved siblings, especially those who live and labor out of our sight.

One of the many things we've learned during the pandemic  
is which workers and what kinds of work are truly essential.

Think janitors and teachers,  
grocery workers and meatpackers,  
cooks and dishwashers.

Another thing we've learned

is how much our lives depend on each other.

We can't just think about how things impact us as individuals.

We need to think about how we are impacted as a whole,  
as a people, as a planet.

As each of us prays for God to mold us, let us also pray together to God  
to mold the families and schools that mold us.

Let us pray for God to mold the groups and institutions  
that tell us the stories  
and teach us the principles

that form the foundation

of our thoughts, words and deeds.

On the eve of Labor Day, let us strive to see the costs that others are bearing for us.<sup>5</sup>

May we be right with God, right with **all** our neighbors,  
not out of a sense of duty but out of love.

May we not focus so much on what is owed us

but how **all of us** can benefit,

how **all of us** can thrive.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06nwm8g>

<sup>2</sup> <https://ceramics.org/about/what-are-engineered-ceramics-and-glass/brief-history-of-ceramics-and-glass>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/art/pottery>

<sup>4</sup> [You are the Potter I am the Clay Lyrics - Vineyard \(zionlyrics.com\)](https://www.zionlyrics.com/You-are-the-Potter-I-am-the-Clay-Lyrics-Vineyard)

<sup>5</sup> <https://twitter.com/RebeccaSolnit/status/1565789885415337984>;

<https://twitter.com/aaronAcarr/status/1565772011988713473>