

One Christmas I received a child’s version of a pottery wheel. I don’t remember if I asked for it or if my parents thought it would be a good place to transfer my artistic energy, but no matter what the intentions behind the gift the results were the same. A mess. Out of all the different things I tried to make, only one I held on to the longest– my attempt at a coil bowl. This was the only item I ever completed to my childlike expectations. Usually, I would just get frustrated at the glob of wet clay in front of me and its inability to conform to what I wanted it to be. Or my mom would get frustrated by the clay that was being tossed from the wheel onto the floor of our basement. Whether it be a dirty floor or my expectations not magically transforming the clay into what I wanted it to be, both my mother and I thought the same thing – this is a mess. The pottery wheel was put away after only a few months of use and was later sold at a garage sale, where some other un-expecting parent picked it up for their child’s artistic expression.

And oh that coil bowl – the one piece that I saw through to fruition. It was nothing special to look at – in fact some may even call it ugly. The coils don’t quite fit together right and by no stretch of the imagination are they evenly spaced, but to me it was perfect. I painted each coil a different color before it was glazed. Even in all of its imperfections, I thought it was beautiful, simply because I made it. More over, it was functional, as it collected spare change in my bedroom for years.

In today’s passage God leads the prophets Jeremiah down to the work area of the Potter. Mud caked on the floor and the relentless heat of the kiln doesn’t distract the worker. Completed jars, bowls, and vases of various shapes and sizes line the shelves and tables, waiting for someone to come and take them home to be put to use. But his finished pieces don’t catch his attention either. He is solely focused on the vessel in front of him. It just doesn’t look quite right. He moves his thumb around the cusp of the opening, hoping to correct the clay’s new direction, but he cannot reign in the clay spinning around the wheel with its own mind about the direction of its creation. So the potter firmly pushes the clay back into a mound onto the wheel and starts again. The potter has learned an important lesson throughout his career – sometimes you need to start over when the vessel tries to take over or the wheel gets away from you. Even with the amount of time spent on the previous vessel, it is still simpler to start over and be satisfied with the results instead of giving into the notion of creating the second-best. And this time the clay conforms to his hands, cracked from years of work. The potter guides the clay into a water jug, with a cusp just big enough to put water in but not so large that it will spill out as the women make their trip back from the well. When the vessel is finished, the potter sets it aside to dry before putting it into the oven. He smiles. This one, this created vessel seems good to him.

The reality is that while this passage is beautiful it is also deeply challenging. While my foray into the visual arts ended with my coil bowl, I did have numerous friends in college who were art majors. Some of my fondest memories of them come from being up in the art building, late into the night, watching them paint, or draw, or work with clay. Sometimes they did not like the direction their piece was going, so they would attempt to fix it. More times than I’m sure they wished, there were times when a piece could not be salvaged to their standards so they would throw the paper streaked with paint away or smash down the mound of clay to start over again. But as painful as it was for them to start over on something they had labored so long and hard on,

the artists' deeper pain came when they had to be critiqued. A handful of my friends quit their art major each semester, after receiving a poor critique on something they saw as beautiful. The professors were looking for flaws in technique and their execution, while the student artist were looking at the piece from the deep place in their heart that it came from and the countless hours they had spent birthing it.

God the potter image can be seen through Christian artwork today. We sing songs about wanting God to shape and mold us, but the images are lacking of the times when God needs to start over again, or to rework a piece of a vessel that is being stubborn against the guide of the Potter's hand, refusing to conform. We like the idea of God making us, as long as that process is done and over. For if it is a continual process then we need to relinquish our will and power to the Creator. Therefore, we avoid the second half of today's passage that speaks about God deciding when to destroy and start over and when to preserve. That's just a bit too much for us to handle.

Really the Potter in today's passage has it a lot easier than God. His creation cannot talk back. Could you imagine creating something – be it a piece of art, a cake, building a house – and have it stop in its construction part way and say 'Well that's good enough. I don't need to be formed any more.' The vessel being created would never reach its full potential. Would never be as good as you know it could be because of impatience.

Or a vessel has been completed and complains about what it looks like or how it is being used. It keeps comparing itself to the vessels to its right and left, telling the Potter in a not so kind voice about how they want to be something different, something more, while the Potter is just crying because the vessel is so beautiful in his eyes.

We want God to be our creator, our maker, our potter, as long as we can be in control. We want to look a certain way, have a certain job, be equal to (if not better) than our neighbors to the right and to the left in terms of wealth and prestige, and be used a certain way. We want God to form us, but not if we have to go about the hard tasks of giving up the things we do that displease God or if it takes more than the hour or two or five a week that we are willing to give. And we most certainly don't want God to be our potter if it means destroying what we hold dear, our health, our wealth, our ideals about who God is, how our neighbor sees us, getting by on the standards of the world around us, even if in God's reshaping of us we will be a better disciple and more fully live into God's plan for our lives. We want a God who does what is good for us on our own terms and in our own timing, and as a result we jump off of God's pottery wheel before we are truly finished, leaving us as only a fraction of the disciple that we could be.

I don't know about you, but the times I've been transformed the most in my life and have felt the closest to God, were during tough times. Times when nothing seemed to be going my way, but through it all I learned an important lesson, drew closer to God, or radically became a different type of disciple. We cannot cry out for God to make and form and shape us if we aren't willing to live up to the potential cost of God reshaping us from the mold we are currently in, even if that means starting all over again.

So the question I have for each of us is are we willing to cry out to God to make and form and shape us, no matter what the cost? Are we willing to relinquish our control so God can create us to our fullest potential? Can we hand over our vision of who we think we should be so God can make us who we are supposed to be? And will we stop comparing ourselves to the other vessels around us, trying to tell God in the process what would make us better when God says that we are beautiful as we are? Will we be willing to sit through the hard and uncomfortable times on the Potter's wheel until God, and God alone, says that we are finished? And the question I have for us as a congregation is are we willing to let God shape and form and create Juniata? Or will we concentrate on how we did things in the past, even if God is calling us to a new thing? Will we do ministry on our terms or God's terms? Will we be willing to stop comparing ourselves to other churches and instead ally with them for God's creative movement through this place? And will we let God and God alone guide us through the hard task of becoming a different type of disciple so we can live out being a disciple-ing congregation?

This past week I had the joy of celebrating a dear friend's ordination. As part of the service, the congregation she is serving presented her with gifts - including this chalice and patten - a gift to serve the gifts of communion. People in the community that made these gifts came together to share their talents and time to craft this. Even as expert potters and master craftsmen, I can guarantee you that at some point the potter needs to start over or smooth something out or make a change. But in doing so they were able to arrive at this gift, this blessing that was offered.

Take us, mold us, use us, fill us, Lord. For we give our lives, both as individuals and as this church, to the Potter's hands. Call us, guide us, lead us, walk beside us, for we give our lives into the Potter's hands. May we live into your perfectly crafted plan. Amen.