

“A Choice of Faith”
Jeremiah 18: 1-11
September 5, 2010
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Let me start with a statement of faith. I have a hard time with the idea that God is in charge of our lives as a potter is with lump of clay to be shaped and turned in whichever direction the potter might wish. If it is to be a cup then a cup it shall be or a platter or a pitcher or whatever, it is the potter who makes the decision. My understanding of, belief structure regarding God doesn't fit with that image because of the notion of evil. If God is in charge, control how do we explain the holocaust or slavery in the United States or so many other issues of evil which murder people or ruin their lives? I believe in a God who participates with me, who continues to call me in every situation to live out God's call to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with that faith.

To confront personally how I understand the idea of God's participation versus control or definition, let me tell you a story. About a week ago, I arrived home about 6 PM in not the best of moods. It had been a long and slow drive of horrible traffic, two accidents, hot and steamy weather, and I was tired, frustrated, and looking forward to a cold drink and dinner. As I walked into the kitchen the phone was ringing and foolishly I answered it. The person on the other end was a telemarketer though I don't remember what they wanted. My response to this person who was simply trying to make a buck, pay his rent, feed his kids can only be described as rude!! I made no attempt to mask my annoyance and took out some of my frustration on him and then hung up! Now, if God were to blame for that behavior it would be a lot easier to accept but I think the only person responsible is the guy I see in the mirror when I shave each morning. I believe God calls me to act, live, be in every situation in a manner which reflects my understanding of God's call to me. And being rude doesn't fit that call!

Now that's just a personal example of how I believe God isn't or doesn't control my behavior as a potter controls the clay and some may find it shocking or even blasphemous but I think if we look closer at the day's pericope or passage we will find some support for this. Jeremiah was a prophet in the seventh century before the Common Era and he spoke to a people whose lives were fairly safe and prosperous. His concerns were that the society and its people didn't embody their beliefs especially as they treated one another and those less fortunate. Here he is probably referring to his concerns that the people were ignoring God's call in the everyday lives and choosing to live in a manner which ignored God's call. This pericope seems to be very concerned with the actions of the people and their belief that they were secure in their lives regardless of what they did.

God speaks to Jeremiah and reminds him that just as God has led them to the Promised Land and enabled them to prosper, God can also bring judgment upon them. BUT also note that God's words here elucidate the idea that if the people change their minds and their way of living, God will change God's response to them! Despite our opening verses and their image of God as the potter who shapes and determines all, here there is implied, at least, that God and people can change and that the change of mind or lifestyle by the people is under their control and not God's.

There is in this an implied threat and a promise, it seems to me. The threat is that God punishes those who do evil. The promise is that God can change just as people can change. Actually, with the image of the potter and the clay in mind, we might consider that there are internal contradictions here which may indicate that in the religious community of the day, the understanding of God's presence and what it meant was under discussion. If one accepts the idea of God as the potter shaping the clay, that implies Divine control and responsibility for all that exists. Evil and/or evil actions become the responsibility of this potter? Perhaps what we have here is a prophet seeking to speak to two distinct schools or theological communities and trying to resolve their differences. It is almost as if within this one pericope we have two views of God and God's involvement in the life of the community or world.

One of the challenges of reading and understanding the Biblical witness is that we ignore how it details involvement in the world. In this pericope, I think we have the opportunity to see that even in the seventh century before the Common Era the understanding of God and God's involvement in the world was evolving, changing. I hope as you read this passage and others that you will take an honest view of it. I really believe that what we often do is ignore the historical nature of the Bible and fail to recognize its internal contradictions. It is very much a book which reflects the relationship of people and their understanding of God's presence and that understanding changes as they change, in a similar manner to our own understandings which change as we go through life and live out our faith. We perhaps should see here the possibility that this is a pericope which contains two different understanding of God. One is that God like the potter forms us and can discard us at any time to rework or re-engineer us. The other is that we participate with God in hearing the call of God and changing or reforming ourselves that we might better reflect God's presence in our lives.

There are innumerable understandings of this text and I simply want to offer one which as I remind you is one you may accept or reject for sermons are not declarations of what one must believe but opportunities to consider a particular passage and how it might be understood. For us to read this text and seek here an understanding of God as the potter who forms us and controls our shape, our minds, our destiny seems to me to be so antithetical to the 21st Century mind. Now that isn't meant to imply that all that the 21st Century mind embraces is necessarily good or should be a reason to reject Biblical ideas. However, we are people of this time in history and our understanding is different from those who live and wrote 2700 years ago. I want to offer a couple ideas for what we might draw from this text.

First, our understanding of God and God's presence is an evolving changing one. We may have at one time accepted an image or understanding of a God who does predestine all and/or control reality. However, I think we are much more attuned to an idea of a God who participates and calls us to live and believe. We are a people for whom personal autonomy is important and that means we and our children can be all that we want to be. We celebrate the idea that WE are responsible for our lives and how they are lived. God's participation is to call us to change, to live, to act in ways which reflect God's call BUT our failure to respond is our responsibility not God's.

Second this understanding leads us to an institutional church whose structures, mission, and worship changes as we seek to find meaning in it. We develop and embrace a denomination

which emphasizes the priesthood of all believers and a democratic governing style which means that as society changes our congregation will change. Consider the role of music in worship. Those of us between the ages of 50 and 70 grew up in a time of social change, questioning of given values, and new forms of musical entertainment. We have always, it seems, found meaning in rock and roll, folk, and rhythm and blues musical genres. To have a worship venue which excludes such would be to have a worship venue which loses the opportunity for us perhaps to find meaning in that worship. Sometimes I think it isn't the very young, the teenagers for whom music and worship ought evolve but for the middle aged. But what we need remember is that our worship style has and will continue to change as we seek to assure that it provides a place of meaningful celebration for all of us. For worship ought reflect our faith and as our belief structure changes so too will our worship style.

Lastly, we ought find in this passage but one more support for the ongoing conversation of this congregation as it continually renews itself. The threat is not from change but from stasis, from any attempt to protect the congregation from change. It is a challenge to all of us to dare to insist on a congregation which celebrates and embraces a faith in which we find meaning, hope, joy, pleasure, and challenge. And doing that will mean we will continually insist on change and renewal of how we celebrate our faith and how we understand it. The discernment process in which we are participating is neither an end nor a beginning but one more step in the continuing process of growth and renewal.

Jeremiah struggled with an image of God which the people could understand, embrace, and worship. His images were ones familiar to them and he sought to engage them thus. We need open ourselves to new images, new ideas as we build a congregational vision for our community. AMEN.