

January 15, 2012
“CRACKED POTS AND NEW VESSELS”
Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison, WI
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“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nathanael was skeptical and possibly sarcastic concerning Philip’s claim that Jesus, the Savior could come from such a tiny town of 200-400 people. Nazareth was an insignificant and economically dependent village close to Sepphoris, the capital of Galilee. And, by association, Jesus of Nazareth was nothing special, maybe even flawed in the eyes of a prospective disciple. Underlying the criticism is “What can he teach me? How could he lead us during this crisis of faith and nation?” Philip you are a crack pot...is implied. Rather than retaliate defensively Philip invites his Nathanael to “Come and see” for himself. (The early church probably used this story to help introduce people to the faith in Christ.)

Of course, Nathanael’s close encounter with Jesus shows the flaws in his logic. Jesus seems to know him inside and out, an honest Israelite who speaks the truth. Nathaniel, who sat under the fig tree, a symbol of spiritual fruitfulness and Israel’s devotion to God is now standing before Jesus, the promised one. Like anyone who is not sure about committing to Christ, not sure about what will come next. Like any of you who have been asked to serve as elders or deacons, or become members of the church, Nathaniel needs a little coaxing. The unspoken thoughts maybe “Yes, this is amazing, however, I’m not sure this is enough evidence that God has chosen you to be the Messiah.” Jesus, the Christ answers his reservations, “*You will see greater things than these*”. *Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.*”

In both of our lessons, the journey of discipleship and faith, begins with this invitation to “Come and see” what God is doing. God is at work, transforming, mending, molding, making, creating, redeeming...you, the people of God, leaders, the church, this church.

However, you maybe wondering “can anything good come from my broken life?”
My flawed character? Or Can anything good come out of this church?

Come and see! What God can do! Come, Let us go down to the Potter’s house where God is at the wheel reshaping a spoiled clay pot. This vision of Jeremiah deals with his own questions about Judea, “Could anything good come out of a nation who turned away from their covenant and devotion to God? What is God doing about it?” The jar was spoiled or flawed. The famous French Medieval Jewish scholar Rashi wrote around 1060 AD that the potter was “making the clay while it was still wet”. And, when Jeremiah writes that God says, “I will repent” he means, “(God) will think another thought”. Our NRSV translation states God says, “I will change my mind” which is almost unthinkable. But, thank God, literally, that we have second chances.

There is hope for all of us in Jeremiah’s vision. God is reworking the church, molding the wet clay into a useable vessel, a jug that that will hold water again, a bowl that will feed the hungry, or a jar that will carry precious scriptures.

So, how do these scriptures and visions of God’s transforming and redeeming spirit inspire you? While you think about that, I’d like to share my reflection in art with you.

Two years ago, I was asked to create a worshipful space for the Interim Ministry Network’s Annual Conference. Leadership and congregational transformation and God’s redemptive grace were the focus. Jeremiah’s vision of God as potter inspired me. Seriously, every day I discovered scriptures, images,

illustrations of pots, potters, wheels, clay, ceramics...It was as if God said, "Here you go! These are the best metaphors for transformation and change for interims and churches in transition. Now, create something! So, I began by painting four watercolors and then transferred them to 3 x 8 foot silk banners.

For me art, is sacred and a spiritual journey. And, inspiration is not a matter of an hour or two on Sunday, it is seven day journey with God saying, "and I'm going to show you greater things." The first banner was God's whirling wheel and hands forming the wet clay into an unknown vessel. Creative, vibrant color swirls around the wheel to show the creative energy around God's transforming and redeeming power. Redemptive red and soothing healing blue come together in God's grace at the wheel. "Melt me, Mold me, Fill me Us me" the words of "Spirit of the Living God" sing around this banner.

The second banner is of the new jar being pulled by the Potter at the wheel. The most difficult and important step in making a successful jar is positioning the clay or centering that clay ball on the wheel. After we are centered on God, the rest is relatively easy. However, a skilled potter knows that pulling up the sides of a jar takes a steady hand. Thus this vessel has a very thin wall, because it is made by an expert potter. Also, you may note the colors of the potter's hand resembles the color pallet of the earth, God's hand is global.

The third banner was inspired by the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit, which I attended at the Minnesota Science Museum. The sacred scrolls were written on parchment around 900 AD and tucked inside ceramic jars for centuries before they were discovered by a poor herdsman between 1947 and 1957. The following decades brought more discoveries of caves around Qumran, Cave 5-7 were unique because you would need to travel through the settlement of Qumran with its' cemeteries, bathing pools used for ritual cleansing, assembly rooms for dining and kilns for pottery. Almost two thousand years later, a miraculous number of the ceramic jars remained intact. Archeologist pieced together oil lamps, water jugs and parchment jars.

The banner hanging here today has a images of clay shards, parchment fragments, cracked pots and glued Qumran Jars. Hopefully it helps you reflect on your own brokenness and the possibility of being useful in our various state of brokenness and repair.

Donna Monson's lesson on the broken jar is a wonderful illustration of that CRACKED POT theology. During this season of Epiphany, God's message to you is "my light will shine" through you! Another inspiring illustration of cracked pots comes not from the Bible, but it should be.

A water bearer in India had two large pots, each hung on each end of a pole which he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, and while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream to the master's house, the cracked pot arrived only half full. For a full two years, this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots full of water in his master's house.

Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments. But, the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfections, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do. After two years of what it perceived to be a bitter failure, it spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream. "I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you." "Why?" asked the bearer. "What are you ashamed of?" I have been able, for these past two years, to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your master's house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work and you don't get full value for your efforts," the pot said. The water bearer felt sorry for the old cracked pot and in his compassion he said, "As we return to the master's house I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path."

Indeed, as they went up the hill, the old cracked pot took notice of the sun warming the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path, and this cheered it some. But at the end of the trail, it still felt bad because it had leaked out half its load, and so again it apologized to the bearer for its failure. The bearer said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you've watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table. Without you being just the way you are, he would not have this beauty to grace his house."

And so now we come full circle- back to Christ call to each of us, just the way we are.

Each of us has our own unique flaws. We're all cracked pots. But if we will allow it, God will use our flaws to bring beauty and grace to the world.

In God's great economy, nothing goes to waste. So, as we seek ways to minister together and as God calls you to the tasks appointed for you, don't be afraid of your flaws. Acknowledge them and allow God to work within you and with you.

You, too, can be the cause of beauty along God's pathway. Go out boldly, knowing that in our weakness we find strength. "So if someone calls you a Crackpot, you'll know it's a compliment. I ALWAYS do."

Whether you consider yourself a Cracked pot or a reformed vessel, or both, today is the day to commit to continue on God's pathway carrying the message, the light, and the living water where ever you go.

And, Christ will show you greater things. You see I believe "Something good has come out of Nazareth and something good will come from this church.

Every day God is molding a new Church, a new people, a new you.

May springs of living water be carried and delivered from such jars of clay as you.