

“Choice vessels”  
Jeremiah 18:1-11  
Philemon 1-21  
Luke 14:25-33  
5 September, 2010  
Proper 18C/Ordinary 23C  
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A few months ago, Wendy Benson asked me, “Have you been to Arts in Action at the Waterperry Gardens?” “No,” I replied. “Well, you *must* go,” she said. “You and the boys will *love* it.” And she was absolutely right—so right, in fact, that one of the boys asked on the way home whether we could buy tickets for next year!

One of the many things we did that day is visit the children’s pottery-throwing tent. They had set up a bunch of pottery wheels and the children (and Joel—who considers himself a child at heart) had a go at creating vessels on the pottery wheels. These pictures show some of the work being done. As I pass around the pictures, you might see some of the things that I observed as I watched them—and recognise how rich Jeremiah’s metaphor is for our life in faith.

The first thing I noticed is that the potter always starts with a rather formless lump of clay. She may have an idea in her mind about what she’d like to create, but the first shape is always rather blob-like and unformed. It’s only by getting the wheel moving, and with the constant movement of the potter’s hands, that the clay begins to change its shape. Most of us have had the experience of life moving too fast—of the wheel spinning too furiously, and we’re feeling that everything is a bit out of our control. At other times, we can feel pinched or prodded in a way that makes no sense to us, that is uncomfortable.

Part of the challenge and the work of faith is trusting that, regardless of how fast the wheel is spinning, there are divine hands upon us—hands that are fully aware of everything that’s going on. At other times in life, it may feel as though the potter has taken her hands off the clay, or like the wheel has slowed down so much that it feels like there’s nothing really happening. But all of this is part of the process that shapes a life and a community.

You see, in Jeremiah’s vision, the clay is not just individuals. It’s not just God working on you or me, individually. The clay is also the collective; the clay represents the entire community. If you think about it that way, it enriches the complexity of the clay, doesn’t it? One comes to appreciate the task of the potter even more, if the clay is a mixture of all the different characters, stories, and choices that make up a given lump of community and their life together.

The second thing I recognised about the potter’s work is the paramount importance of keeping the clay moist during the entire time of creating the vessel. For the Church, this is a reminder to keep our souls hydrated with the Holy Spirit. There’s lots of water imagery in the Bible and in the Christian tradition. Consider the baptismal imagery we have of ‘bathing in the Spirit’, or keeping a community ‘steeped in prayer’, as we are continuously being shaped and re-shaped.

After the vessel is shaped for its purpose, it is left to dry before it is placed in a firing kiln—and these images also suit the life and work of the Church. It’s a pretty sure thing that individuals and communities will go through dry and even firey times after taking shape and becoming something that looks defined. Again, it is the work and the blessing of faith that calls us to trust in the One who is with us through all of these stages, who never abandons us at any point.

Third (back onto the pottery wheel where the vessel is still taking shape): I noticed that sometimes, even steady fingers created a wobbly or uneven pot. Both the potter and the clay responded to each other. As I alluded to just a minute ago, in our life together, every one of us makes choices that impact what kind of clay our community will be in the Potter’s

hands. As few as one or two individuals can wreak havoc in a community, making it difficult material for even God to work with. Equally, one or two people can make all the difference in a troubled or uninspired lump of community, if they bring the right gifts and spirit, and they make choices or take actions that facilitate harmony and cohesiveness.

Having said that, I think it's also important to acknowledge that there's nothing inherently wrong with a wobbly or wonky or strange-looking pot. What matters most is whether that vessel fulfils its purpose.

One of my favourite gifts is this blue ceramic piece that was given to me by the church I pastored for a while in Lund, Sweden. Now let's be honest: it's not a beautiful shape. The legs are a little bit stubby and twisted, where the rest of the vessel is smooth, and it's got a tiny little half-knob at the top that looks a little odd. I don't know whether this is what the creator of this little piece of art intended for it to look like at the outset. But I've grown to love this little vessel, because its purpose is wonderful: it's an oil lamp and it provides beautiful, glowing light. And I'll tell you something: although it's not something I would have felt drawn to or chosen for myself, I think it's a beautiful vessel now, because it has brought light and meaning to my life.

Strange-looking communities and eccentric individuals are no less lovely in the Maker's eyes, of that I'm certain. God can use even the most uneven and wobbly collections of people to accomplish inspiring and transforming things.

And that leads me to my fourth observation. More than once, the vessel that was emerging on the wheel wasn't quite what the potter at the wheel had intended or hoped for. And at that point, a choice needed to be made: either they could change their vision of what it was becoming—a pitcher became a mug, or a teapot became a plate, for example. Or, they could stop the wheel, scrape the clay off, mash it all back into a new clump and start over. Jeremiah saw a similar thing happening in his vision. "So I went down to the potter's house," he reports, "and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. Then the word of the LORD came to me: Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says they LORD. Just like clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel." (Jer. 18:3-6a)

It's not a pleasant thought, that God would destroy something and start over, like a lump of clay that never quite pleased the potter. But I think the verses that follow expand the thought in some important ways. "At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it." (Jer. 18:7-10) In other words, the choices of the community affect the 'decisions' or responses of the divine potter.

Who hasn't experienced or witnessed the ways in which decisions made years ago have affected today? Karl Benz, widely considered the father of the modern automobile, could not possibly have imagined the monumental impact it would have on the entire course of history and ecology when he made the decision to power his motorcar with gasoline instead of steam or electricity. In the scheme of the entire design, it was probably not a major decision. But that decision has touched literally every country in the world and has reached right up into the stratosphere.

We may not think about it at the time, but the jobs we take or relationships we spend time on (or don't) inevitably shape us and impact us at levels we never fully see in day-to-day ways.

We're never told what choice Philemon made: whether he granted Onesimus his freedom or retained him as his slave. But it's clear that his choice would have had an impact

on countless peoples' lives—it would only start with Onesimus' life. The choice Philemon made would send ripple effects throughout the church, and right on out into the world. One choice was life-giving at every level; the other would affirm enslavement in every way.

At the community level, choices also make all the difference. Most of us have probably heard of this general scenario: a declining church decides to take some risks and move well out of their comfort zones—a choice that requires everyone to make sacrifices and adjust to new ways of seeing and doing things. But five years later, the church is buzzing with new life and the sacrifices that were made feel more like brilliant investments in hindsight, as everyone feels more alive in their faith, connected in community, and in love with God.

On the other side of town, a different congregation had decided not to change anything—to just “keep on keeping on”. Maybe it wasn't a conscious choice, and certainly if they'd known then what they know now they would have done things differently. But at the time they stayed the course primarily because individual people felt no particular ability or interest in doing something they'd either never done before, or didn't feel comfortable doing. And five years later, the decline had kept on keeping on, too. Those members felt discouraged, demoralized and disaffected because no one was stepping forward to save them. They wondered whether and why God had abandoned them, and felt like a rather squashed vessel on the Potter's wheel.

The choices that this congregation made one hundred years ago, and twenty years ago, a decade ago all have contributed to shaping who and what we are today. The decisions we will make at our Annual General Meeting this coming Thursday, and the vision, goals and priorities we will begin to establish at our All-Church Away Day in October, will all have some impact on what Wheatley U.R.C. looks like ten, twenty, and fifty years from now. God works with our choices—the choices we made in the past, and those we make today—to build and plant, or to pluck up, destroy, and refashion altogether.

I made one final observation in the pottery tent at Arts in Action. And that was that the children (and an occasional adult) found it very helpful to have someone who was more experienced in pottery-making nearby, mentoring them in the basic techniques and answering questions they had along the way. One of the most inspiring things about the Arts in Action event as a whole was observing people who were passionate about their calling, who were clearly doing what they had been gifted to do, and who wanted to share with others the joy they found in their work. Many of the artists found ways of encouraging others to try for themselves what they (the artists) had found so rewarding.

The primary purpose of the Church is to share the good news and joy we have found in our relationship with God; to tell and live out the narrative and ways of Jesus Christ, and to encourage others to experience it for themselves. Jesus was clear that the choice to follow him would not (or should not) be an easy or thoughtless one. We get involved in Christian community because it is reassuring and strengthening to have others alongside us who may have more experience, or wisdom, or understanding about their Christian faith. Then again, they may not—and may instead ask questions that help us to grow in our own well-seasoned thinking and relating to God and life and the world. We choose to participate in a community of faith because of the ways that the people around us become the hands of God upon our own lives; they remind us of the Potter's presence and steady touch.

As vessels still being shaped by the Divine Potter, may we in this community of faith, individually and collectively, make wise and prayerful choices—choices rooted in the symbolic water of the Spirit; choices that lead to life and freedom; choices that result in us becoming beautiful, generous vessels of God's own Spirit in the world. Amen.