

The 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jeremiah 18:1-12; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Luke 14:25-33; Philemon 1-21

Jeremiah 18:1-12 is the famed “potter and clay” metaphor that is used by the prophet from Jeremiah 18:1 through 20:18 to describe God’s interaction with God’s people. In this Old Testament Lesson for the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, God instructs Jeremiah to “go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words” (vs. 1). Jeremiah does as he is instructed, and there watches a potter working at his wheel. As the wheel spins and the clay is being formed into a pot, it develops a defect in it. The potter, unable to correct that defect, simply collapses the clay on the wheel and begins fashioning a new vessel from that clay.

“This is how I am at work with Israel”, God says to Jeremiah – and thus Jeremiah proclaims to the people. “Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel” (vs. 6). At any moment, the potter can be shaping the clay on the wheel into the vessel he desires it to be. But also, at any moment, that potter can collapse the clay on that wheel, seemingly destroy the pot upon which he is working, and begin the formation of a new vessel. So it is that God can shape, collapse, and form once again God’s people at any time that God so chooses. Just as the potter is the one with the plans for the pot and can reshape it when it doesn’t turn out the way he intends it to be, so God has the freedom and the capacity to “re-form” God’s people with respect to God’s plan. Thus, by declaring this, God is making it clear that the spoiling of God’s first intentions is not final, but is only temporary. As Winston Churchill most eloquently put it, “Success is never final; failure is never fatal. It is courage that counts.”

That prophetic declaration is particularly strengthened by a unique use of one phrase in the text. In God’s declaration through Jeremiah that “just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand”, God calls Judah “O house of Israel”. But by the time of this prophecy, the northern kingdom of Israel no longer existed; it had been destroyed by Assyria in 722 BCE, and its people either taken into exile or enslaved. So, if Jeremiah would have been accurate, he should have referred to the existing nation as “Judah”. Instead, he uses the name “Israel” for “Judah”, thus indicating that Judah was now heir to God’s historic purposes originally worked through Israel, and thus is an indicator of God’s election of God’s people (even though their nation no longer existed).

Thus, Jeremiah is stating, destruction of Israel (“the pot”) is not an indication of the elimination or abandonment by God of God’s intentions for his people. Rather, it is only the continuation of the process by which the people are “re-formed” into a new “pot” – the vessel of Judah. And if Judah fails to live up to its mission and purposes to which they have been called by God, God will destroy them as a nation and “re-form” them into still a third “pot” – the remnant people (Jer. 31). Failure is not fatal to the cause – only to individuals and institutions!

Jeremiah specifically develops this theme in the remainder of this prophecy. He does so first by stating this premise of destruction and reshaping as a principle. “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” (vss. 7-10). Thus, God is not only at work in Israel but in any and all nations and kingdoms.

But Jeremiah then quickly moves from theological speculation to sharp application for all that is now left of Israel – the small southern kingdom of Judah. “Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doing” (vs. 11).

The potter will collapse any vessel that he is shaping on his wheel that does not conform to his intentions for it. So, Judah has the very clear truth before it that God so collapsed Israel in front of their very eyes, for Israel had been unfaithful to God’s intentions for it. Likewise, God can as easily collapse Judah if it does not conform to God’s expectations for it. If Judah does not diligently act out God’s intentions for its political, economic and religious life to do justice, work for an equitable distribution of wealth and elimination of poverty, and to “walk humbly with their God”, then they will have failed the potter’s intentions for it and will be destroyed on the wheel! Therefore, “turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doing”.

But will Judah conform to God’s expectations for it? The next words of the prophet Jeremiah are sobering words indeed. “But (Judah) said, “It is no use! We will follow our own plans and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will”” (vs. 12). It isn’t simply that the leaders and people of Judah will slide into disobedience. It is that they are emphatically choosing a different way of life than that which Yahweh prescribes for God’s people. They are called by God to be the “shalom community” of justice, equitable sharing of wealth and relationship with God, and they instead intentionally choose to be “like all the other nations of the world”, acting out of an injustice of oppression, an economics of greed and exploitation and a religion of control. Both Judah’s “principalities” and people refuse to repent! Therefore, the exile will be the inevitable consequence of their refusal!

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18 is one of the most profound and insightful psalms in the Psalter. It begins with the penetrating words, “O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away” (139:1-2). With these opening lines, the Psalmist introduces his theme – God’s omniscient and utterly loving relationship to us. God knows us through and through because he has created us and loves us with the deepest, giving love – whether we respond to that love or not.

“You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it” (vss. 2-6).

What the Psalmist proclaims here reveals the profound difference between the ancient Hebrew faith and the religions that surrounded Israel. God is described in the most intimate terms

possible. God knows each of us through and through, for nothing is hidden from him. It is not simply the words we speak or the actions we take that expose us to God. It is the very thoughts we think, even when those thoughts are in the process of being formed! Every instinct, every emotion, every reflection, every temptation that wells up inside us, God already knows about before they are even fully formed. Yahweh has indeed “searched me and known me”, and yet in spite of what he sees, still chooses to love me. We can only respond, “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain (or even understand) it”!

The Psalmist then declares several things about our relationship with God. First, we cannot escape from God or his love – whether we are in heaven or in hell, the limits of the earth or of the universe, the extremes of night or day (139:7-12). God sees right through them – and us! “Even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as day” (vs. 12).

Second, there is nothing we can do, think or be that will surprise God. He knows us fully because God created us. He knew us when we were only “unformed substance”. He “knit us together in our mother’s womb”. He determined the length of our life, and the substance of that life – even before the first day of that life occurred (vss. 13-18)!

Third, God knows our attitudes and actions toward others. He knows of our hatreds, our loathing of those who loath God. And he knows we know of that amazing love even of those who loathe God so that he will not act against them as we might, if we were God (vss. 19-22).

So, before such an awesome, remarkable, holy and loving God, how can we respond? There is only one way: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (vss. 23-24)!

Psalm 139 is an overwhelming and moving psalm, so moving that I have found it is among the most comforting selections I can choose for a funeral or memorial service. What makes it so deeply touching is what separated this psalm from all the other religious literature of its time, and what separated Yahweh worship from the worship of pagan gods. Relationship with this God is personal! God has the most insightful understanding of each of us and all of us as God’s people; there is nothing that can be hidden from him. And yet, in spite of such knowledge, our God chooses to love us and to call us to follow him. Yahweh is a God who wants relationship with his creation, and he will assertively seek such a relationship. Oneness with this God does not come about by following proper ritual, learning liturgy, performing sacrifices, conducting ordered worship but by coming into a face-to-face relationship with the One who can see right through you! Psalm 139 is such an overwhelming and moving psalm, because it so beautifully describes the overwhelming and moving God whom we worship and adore!

Luke 14:25-33 is one of the “hard sayings” of Jesus found throughout the Gospel of Luke (e.g., 8:4-21; 9:23-27; 9:57-62; 12:13-59). It is another manifestation of the priorities of Jesus’ “Upside-Down Kingdom” presented throughout that Gospel.

Earlier in the 14th chapter, Luke had Jesus tell the parable of the great banquet (14:15-24). In that parable, the invited well-to-do guests all found excuses for not attending the banquet

planned by one of Israel's influential and positioned people. In anger, therefore, the host sent his servants out into the streets and lanes of the town, and into the countryside to "bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame", for "none of those who were (originally) invited will taste my dinner".

In this parable, Jesus suggested that God's kingdom, rather than being made up of the powerful, the wealthy and the influential, was made up of "the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" – in other words, the peasants of society. Thus, those on the bottom rungs of society were those most attractive to Jesus (and, presumably, to God). In this parable, therefore, Jesus suggests that it is not one's position, prestige, family connections, or wealth that determines that person's role and status in the fulfilling of God's intentions for the world, but his or her commitment to justice, equitable distribution of wealth and authentic relationship with God.

Now, in the Gospel Lesson for the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Jesus makes specific what it was earlier that he suggested. In this passage, Jesus bluntly states, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" (vss. 26-27).

One's possessions, one's position in society, even one's family can stand as impediment to authentic discipleship. One's commitment to Christ and His Kingdom must be such that even caring for one's own family must stand as if it were hatred in comparison to commitment to the realization of God's shalom community. Next to Christ and His Kingdom, all other loves must be as hatred in comparison. That is how "upside-down" the kingdom must be, if we are truly to be disciples of Jesus Christ in working for the transformation of the world into His Kingdom.

Jesus then moves on to say to his followers, "Think carefully and weigh the alternatives facing you – following the priorities of the world (seeking after power, position, prestige, possessions, or even being well-liked) or following after me (giving yourself to God's shalom in this world by working for justice, the equitable sharing of wealth and life centered in relationship with God)." Jesus urges those who are intrigued by him and by his message to consider carefully whether this is really what they want to do with their lives. And he urges them to consider by a most intriguing means.

"Which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish". Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace" (vss. 28-32).

Jesus uses two stories to urge his listeners to invest careful reflection in the proposed action they are contemplating before taking that action. If you are going to construct a building, determine whether you have the financial capital to complete the construction; otherwise, you might be embarrassed when the money runs out before the building is completed. Likewise, if you (as a

king) are contemplating war with an enemy, determine whether you have sufficient forces to win that war before declaring that war; otherwise, you might face the ignominy of either having to sue for peace or losing the war!

Likewise, if you are considering giving yourself to Christ and his kingdom, think carefully before making that decision; weigh that cost. The key words in Jesus' parable are "sit down". "Which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost" (v. 28). Or, again, "What king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider" (v. 35). The words "sit down", used twice, are the words of careful and unhurried reflection, avoiding getting swept away in the enthusiasm of the moment and of the objective, but instead giving studied and calculated thought to the matter before making a decision.

It is very comparable to Nehemiah's statement about his own reflection before acting to confront the powerful Israelites who were using their wealth to exploit Israel's poor. He wrote, "After thinking it over, I brought charges against the nobles and the officials" (Neh. 5:7). But what the Hebrew actually says is, "After I took counsel with myself . . .". Thus, Jesus is suggesting that before one makes a commitment to the Upside Down Kingdom of Jesus and its reversed priorities, one needs to "take counsel with one's self" and carefully decide if one wants to center one's life in working for justice, equitable distribution of wealth and drawing people into relationship with God. The decision needs to be a very carefully made (and likely, continuously made) decision.

Jesus then draws his conclusion from the argument he has just made. But the conclusion is not what one would have expected him to draw. The conclusion with which one would expect Jesus to end should be, "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple unless you deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me" (viz., Luke 9:23). Instead, Jesus ends with the surprising words, "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions" (v. 33). Why does Jesus end this declaration in this way?

What is happening is that Jesus is gradually becoming more specific as he and his disciples approach Jerusalem, and the persecution and death that await him (and them?) there. And what Jesus wishes to communicate to those who are following him or are even intrigued by him is that it is money, and especially the love of money that is the greatest competitor to the kingdom of God.

In the teaching that makes up this gospel lesson, Jesus has stressed to his followers that one's possessions, one's position in society, even one's commitment to one's family can stand as impediment to the kingdom of God. So Jesus wants each of his potential followers to take careful "counsel with him/herself" about the priorities one chooses for his/her life. And that means recognizing that "none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions"!

Money is the principal deterrent of the kingdom of God! "You cannot serve God and mammon" (Luke 16:13). In the Greco-Roman world, it was possible for a slave to be owned by and thus to serve two masters. But that is not true in regards to the service of God and the service of wealth,

for they are so diametrically opposed in *purpose*, *intent* and *extent* that it is impossible for a person or a community to give equal service to both.

God and wealth are diametrically opposed in *purpose*, because one demands giving your life away in service and love to others while the other demands accumulation, hoarding and parsimoniousness. Both are diametrically opposed in *intent* because the service of God is built on generosity and the giving away of life while the service of money is designed to awaken and nurture greed. Both are opposed in *extent* because both require total allegiance and devotion from a person. For it will be your possessions and your desire to preserve and sustain your possessions that will inevitably move you toward greed, exploitation, oppression and control. Thus, Jesus teaches in this passage that “None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions”.

Philemon 1-21 makes up the majority of Paul’s short letter to Philemon (there are only four additional verses at its close, consisting of personal references and arrangements for a visit). The history of this letter in its impact upon the western world is a prime example of how Christianity (or any belief or religion) can be twisted by followers in order to serve the agenda of the larger society rather than to act as reformers of that society.

The traditional interpretation of the letter to Philemon is that Philemon’s slave, Onesimus (pronounced “Oh ness ah muss”), had escaped to Paul and had become very “useful” to the apostle, assisting Paul in the carrying out of his ministry, even though he was in the confinement of prison. Paul is now writing to the Christian owner of Onesimus, asking him to take him back “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother” (vs. 16).

In reality, there is no indication from this text that Onesimus was a slave. Nowhere in the letter to Philemon does Paul suggest that Onesimus “belongs to” Philemon, nor that Philemon is the “lord” or “master” of Onesimus. Nowhere does Paul state directly or even hint that Onesimus is a slave. In fact, Onesimus is identified as Philemon’s “brother in the flesh and in the Lord” (vs. 16b) – that is, both Philemon’s blood-brother and a fellow Christian (“brother in Christ”). Thus, Onesimus is a double brother of Philemon – both by sharing common parents and by being fellow Christians in God’s spiritual family.

From whence, then, does the idea come that is overwhelmingly accepted by the church today that Onesimus was the slave of Philemon? It comes from two sources. First, in the text itself, Paul writes, “Perhaps this is the reason Onesimus was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother both in the flesh and in the Lord” (vss. 15-16). The text appears to be saying that Onesimus was once a slave of Philemon’s, but has now become his brother by receiving Christ as his savior – and so should be treated as a brother rather than as a slave. But that is not what the Greek implies. The key emphasis in the sentence is not the word “slave” but the word “as”. That is, the relationship that existed between Philemon and Onesimus was one of estrangement between two blood-brothers, so that the relationship between them was not as it ought to be – brother to brother – but as the older Philemon domineering and controlling his brother *as if he were a slave*.

Thus, Paul is saying to Philemon, you treated your brother as if he were not your brother at all, but was rather your slave; you dominated, oppressed and perhaps even exploited him. He couldn't take it any longer and ran away for protection to me, Paul. Well now, Philemon, you need to receive back your brother, not as the one whom you have dominated in the past, but rather as if you were receiving me, Paul (vs. 17). Welcome him as you would welcome me. And treat him as you would treat me – with respect and compassion and love (which is the only fitting way to treat your brother – especially when he has become your brother-in-Christ as well as your blood-brother).

What is significant is that this letter to Philemon is not the only time that Paul uses the metaphor “slave” to describe the state of a person before receiving Christ. In Galatians 4:7, Paul states that the Galatians are no longer slaves, but are now brothers and sisters in Christ's family. They are “no longer as a slave” (Gal. 4:7); so, likewise, Onesimus is “no longer as a slave” (Phil. 16) to Philemon. Paul uses the exact same words to describe the spiritual ostracizing of both the unrepentant Galatians (who were clearly not legally slaves) as he does to describe Onesimus' former relationship with his brother.

So, the misinterpretation of vs. 15-17 of Paul's letter to Philemon has contributed to the popular perception that Onesimus was a slave. But the idea that he was a slave also has arisen due to the strange interpretation placed upon this letter by the great Christian orator and theologian, John Chrysostom (c. 347-407). Until Chrysostom advocated the position that Onesimus was a slave, the church had generally interpreted this letter by Paul to be either about forgiveness or about a concrete addressing of the conflict between Onesimus and Philemon that had estranged them and forced Onesimus to flee to Paul. In fact, there is not one document available today from the Christian church over the 300 years that separated this letter from Chrysostom that suggested that Onesimus was a slave. There was no such tradition in the early church.

Why did Chrysostom interpret Paul's letter to Philemon to be about returning a slave to his master? Chrysostom was not only the best-known Christian preacher of his day and bishop of Constantinople (the capitol of the Eastern Roman Empire). He was also one of the outstanding lawyers of the Roman Empire. As such a renowned lawyer, it fell Chrysostom's lot to integrate much of Christian doctrine with Roman law when Christianity became the official religion of the empire. One of the thorny issues that had to be resolved was the matter of Roman slavery, which was the economic backbone of the empire. By interpreting the book of Philemon as a book that taught that (in Chrysostom's words) “we ought not to withdraw slaves from their masters”, Chrysostom could justify the Roman practice of slavery, saying it was consistent with the teachings of St. Paul. Thus, Chrysostom argued, “many are reduced to blasphemy, and of saying Christianity has been introduced into life for the subversion of everything Roman, including masters having their slaves taken from them”. Many Christian scholars of the day resisted Chrysostom's interpretation of Paul's letter to Philemon, insisting that he was “trifling” with the text. But his interpretation stuck – and has continued to hold until today. Such use of scripture to try to prove one's case rather than to let scripture speak for itself is what I meant earlier in this exegesis when I wrote, “The history of this letter in its impact upon the western world is a prime example of how Christianity can be twisted by followers in order to serve the agenda of the larger society”.

Incidentally, Chrysostom was not the only Christian to use the book of Philemon to justify slavery. Once Chrysostom interpreted it this way, the Pandora's Box was opened for Philemon to be used down through the centuries by Christians and non-Christians alike to justify this practice. This was particularly true in the United States, when 19th-century American pro-slavery advocates referred to Philemon as "the Pauline Mandate", and used Paul's apparent return of the slave Onesimus to his owner, Philemon to support their passage by Congress of the Fugitive Slave Law which required the return of runaway slaves, caught anywhere in the United States, to their masters.

What, then, was Paul's letter to Philemon really all about? Apparently, while Paul was a prisoner in Rome awaiting execution, Onesimus came to join him. While with Paul, Onesimus confessed Christ as savior and became immensely useful in a number of ways to Paul while the great apostle was under house-arrest (a Roman citizen would not be incarcerated in a jail but in a house where he lived in relative well-being and with a great deal of latitude to carry on his work and life until his execution).

Paul had undertaken a working relationship with a congregation in an unnamed city with its founders, Philemon, Apphia and Archippus (vss. 1-2). What that relationship was and where that church was situated, we do not know; all we know is that it met in Philemon's house. The ministry and future life of that congregation was being threatened by the intense conflict and hostility between Philemon and his non-Christian brother, Onesimus, apparently over a significant debt Onesimus had incurred and for which Philemon was ultimately responsible (vs. 18). That relationship had become so hostile that Onesimus had run away to Paul where apparently he felt safe. Now that Onesimus had become a Christian, Paul was now attempting to heal the relationship between the two brothers by sending Onesimus back to his hometown and by begging Philemon to lovingly receive him as his "brother-in-Christ" as well as his blood-brother.

To accomplish the reconciliation, Paul takes a very concrete action. In the cover letter Paul sends with Onesimus, the apostle states that he will personally pay off the debt of Philemon's brother. Reconciliation of the brothers and thus the continuing peace of the church are so important to Paul that he is willing to literally "put his money where his mouth is". He is willing to pay off Onesimus' debt, so that money will not stand between the two brothers ("None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions!"). If Philemon is tempted to demur on Paul's offer, Paul then goes on to remind him, "I remind you that you owe me even your own self" (that is, you owe me a greater debt than Onesimus owes you, because you owe me your relationship with Christ which you would not now have if I hadn't won you to Christ). Thus, Paul concludes, "Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say" (vs. 21) – that is, not only accepting Paul's repayment of Onesimus' loan, but of receiving Onesimus as a brother-in-Christ as well as his blood-brother, and thus ending the feud between the two of them.

There is, in Paul's negotiation with Philemon, a most intriguing word play. Paul writes, "Formerly, Onesimus was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful" (vs. 11), and then, "Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord" (vs. 20). The word, "onesimus" is the Greek word for "useful" or "beneficial". What Paul is saying, therefore, is that at one time

Onesimus was not useful to Philemon because of the struggle between them, but now he has truly become an “onesimus” because of his conversion to Christ. Therefore, let Paul have the privilege of making Onesimus an “onesimus” to Philemon once again – a brother rather than an enemy! Philemon’s reconciliation with Onesimus would be of benefit (i.e., “Onesimus”) to both Paul and to Philemon. It is a beautiful play on words.

Onesimus was apparently reconciled to Philemon. And Onesimus went on to become most “useful” to Philemon, to Paul, to the church, and most of all, to Christ. According to tradition, Onesimus went on to become a minister of the gospel, following in the steps of Paul, and eventually became bishop of the church in Ephesus. As that church’s bishop, Onesimus was martyred for his faith. Such service for Christ and his Kingdom was the result of one man believing in another, and being willing to invest his money in him in order to heal the breach between his brother and that man, and thus to enable him to become a most “useful benefit” to Christ and to Christ’s church throughout Asia Minor!

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