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The potter and the clay. God's building.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Jeremiah 18. The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words. So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel.

And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do. Then the word of the Lord came to me, O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done, declares the Lord? Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation concerning which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it.

And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good

that I had intended to do to it. Now therefore say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, Thus says the Lord, Behold, I am shaping disaster against you, and devising a plan against you. Return every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds.

But they say, That is in vain. We will follow our own plans, and will every one act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart. Therefore thus says the Lord, Ask among the nations, Who has heard the like of this? The virgin Israel has done a very horrible thing.

Does the snow of Lebanon leave the crags of Syrian? Do the mountain waters run dry, the cold flowing streams? But my people have forgotten me. They make offerings to false gods. They make them stumble in their ways in the ancient roads, and to walk into side roads, not the highway, making their land a horror, a thing to be hissed at forever.

Every one who passes by it is horrified, and shakes his head. Like the east wind I will scatter them before the enemy. I will show them my back, not my face, in the day of their calamity.

Then they said, Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah. For the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come, let us strike him with the tongue, and let us not pay attention to any of his words.

Hear me, O Lord, and listen to the voice of my adversaries. Should good be repaid with evil? Yet they have dug a pit for my life. Remember how I stood before you, to speak good for them, to turn away your wrath from them.

Therefore deliver up their children to famine. Give them over to the power of the sword. Let their wives become childless and widowed.

May their men meet death by pestilence, their youths be struck down by the sword in battle. May a cry be heard from their houses, when you bring the plunderer suddenly upon them. For they have dug a pit to take me, and laid snares for my feet.

Yet you, O Lord, know all their plotting to kill me. Forgive not their iniquity, nor blot out their sin from your sight. Let them be overthrown before you.

Deal with them in the time of your anger. Jeremiah chapter 18 begins with the Lord's direction to Jeremiah to go to the house of the potter. The theme of pottery will be important in chapter 19 as well.

As a metaphor, the relationship between the potter and the clay is one that's used for God's relationship with his people on a few occasions in scripture. In Isaiah chapter 45 verses 9 to 11 Woe to him who strives with him who formed him, a pot among earthen pots. Does the clay say to him who forms it, what are you making? Or, your work has no

handles.

Woe to him who says to a father, what are you begetting? Or to a woman, with what are you in labour? Thus says the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, and the one who formed him. Ask me of things to come. Will you command me concerning my children and the work of my hands? Isaiah chapter 64 verse 8 But now, O Lord, you are our Father, we are the clay, and you are our potter.

We are all the work of your hand. Most famously, this imagery is taken up by the apostle Paul in Romans chapter 9 verses 18 to 24. So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

You will say to me then, why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will? But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is moulded say to its moulder, why have you made me like this? Has the potter no right over the clay to make out of the same lump one vessel for honourable use, and another for dishonourable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only, but also from the Gentiles? Familiar as we may be with uses of the imagery of the potter and the clay, we should beware of some of the assumptions that we might bring to this text. Christian uses of this imagery have often focused on the Lord's power and determination, apart from and prior to anything that the clay has a part in. The Lord as the potter determines what the clay should be, and the clay becomes that thing.

The clay has no agency or determination in the matter. The clay cannot resist its maker. The clay cannot change its maker's mind.

However, while the symbol of the potter and the clay here in Jeremiah does emphasise the sovereignty of the Lord, it is the dynamic process of forming the clay, not the prior decision of what to form it into, that is focused upon here. And here comes the real surprise. In the Lord's use of this symbolism with Jeremiah, the potter's purpose for the clay is resisted by the clay, and as a result the potter's purpose for the clay changes.

There is a dynamic relationship between the potter and the clay here, that while representing the potter's sovereignty, simultaneously emphasises his responsiveness to the material that he is working upon. And while Jeremiah has followed the Lord's direction, and has seen the potter perform these actions upon the clay, now the Lord's word comes to him, and he is granted to understand the meaning of what he has seen. The Lord presents two different scenarios, the first in which the Lord has determined some disaster upon a nation, and the second in which the Lord has determined to bless a nation.

In the first case, if the nation responds in a positive way to its maker, then the Lord will relent of his intention to destroy it. In the second, contrasting scenario, if the Lord had purposed to bless a nation, and it responds in a negative way, doing evil and not listening to the voice of the Lord, then the Lord can relent of the good that he intended to do to it, and it can be destroyed. It is in this context that Jeremiah gives a word of warning to the people of Judah.

The Lord has a purpose to destroy them, but yet in the analogy of the potter and the clay, there is the hope that if they truly repent, the Lord might relent and they might not suffer his judgement. But yet in verse 12, we see that they have been stubborn in their evil way, they have not repented, they have not turned or responded. God's warnings have gone unheeded.

Verse 13 contains a homonym of the word used for stubbornness in verse 12, in the term used for horrible thing. Israel's infidelity is unprecedented even among the pagan nations. The pagan nations don't abandon even false idols, but Israel has abandoned the living and true God.

And when Israel, the Lord's people, abandon the Lord, they become monstrous, they cease to be themselves. The Lord makes this point by contrasting their infidelity with the fidelity of the created order. The snow of Lebanon does not leave the crags of Sirion, the mountain waters do not run dry.

The created order is faithful in its paths, but Israel has abandoned their God. The result has been disorientation and decay. Israel has wandered off on false paths, and their land has become desolate, a site of death and destruction.

As they have forgotten the Lord, the Lord will scatter them before their enemies. As they have turned their backs on Him, so in the day of Judah's calamity, He will turn His back on them. As a prophet declaring the Lord's judgment upon the people, Jeremiah seems to have faced rising opposition.

And in verse 18, we have a window into conspiracies made against him. Jeremiah has become a public enemy, the leading authorities feel threatened by him, and they intend to take him out. There are three forms of public authority mentioned here, who rule by three different modes of speech.

The priest rules by means of the law, the wise rule by means of wise counsel, and the prophet rules by means of the word of the Lord. Jeremiah's bearing of the effective word of God, that bears testimony against them, is a threat to the authority of each of these figures. He declares the wise to be foolish, the priest to have forsaken the law, and the prophets to be speaking empty words of falsehood.

If Jeremiah is not opposed, their authority is placed in jeopardy. They seek to oppose him

by striking him with their tongue. This might mean speaking against him publicly, in forms of slander and gossip, but most likely it means something even beyond that, that they will make official charges against him.

Back at the time of his call in chapter 1, the Lord had promised to be with Jeremiah against all of his enemies. In chapter 1, verse 8, In verses 17-19, In verse 18, The same verb is used in verse 19, The implied false testimony of Jeremiah's adversaries in verse 18, sets up a juridical context. Faced with false witness, Jeremiah calls upon the Lord to judge, to give ear to his case, and to listen to the voice of his adversaries.

He calls upon the Lord to minister justice in his difficult situation. He has been faithful in his calling. He has prayed for the deliverance of the people, that God's wrath might not come upon them, and yet now they are repaying him with evil for the good that he has done.

At this point, the prophet prays, not for their deliverance, but for their judgment, that God's just vengeance will come speedily upon them. God is the faithful and just God, the God who stands by his word and stands by his prophet. He is the God who will bring judgment to bear upon people who forsake him, and the people who oppose his word.

And Jeremiah, confident in these facts, turns to the Lord in his distress. Their sins must not be forgiven, their iniquities not blotted out. The time for their destruction has come.

A question to consider, was it appropriate for the prophet Jeremiah to pray for the destruction of his enemies? Why or why not? 1 Corinthians chapter 3 Are you not being merely human? According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder, I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become manifest, for the day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

Do you not know that you are God's temple, and that God's spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple. Let no one deceive himself.

If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, He catches the wise in their craftiness.

And again, The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile. So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or the present, or the future.

All are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's. Paul ended chapter 2 of 1 Corinthians by speaking of the contrast between the natural and the spiritual person, and the way that the spiritual person, the person who has the spirit of God and the mind of God in Christ, has perception that natural persons lack. Indeed, the spiritual person can judge all things, while being judged by no one.

Yet, beginning in chapter 3, Paul circles back to the problem he had highlighted at the beginning of this section, in chapter 1 verses 10 to 12. I appeal to you brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people, that there is quarrelling among you, my brothers.

What I mean is that each one of you says, I follow Paul, or I follow Apollos, or I follow Cephas, or I follow Christ. As long as the Corinthians think and act in such a way, they cannot be addressed as spiritual people. They haven't grasped the mind of Christ and his wisdom, but need to be taught the most basic rudiments of the Christian faith, being given milk rather than solid food.

They aren't ready for anything more. We find a similar statement contrasting the milk of instruction for infants in Christ, and solid food of wisdom for the mature in Hebrews 5, 12-14. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God.

You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. The sign that they are of the flesh, that they are operating as natural persons rather than persons of the Spirit, is seen in the jealousy and conflict that currently marks the community.

This is precisely the way of the flesh. The flesh creates a certain sort of community, a community of competitive and conflictual status-seeking, in which people bite and devour each other, as Paul discusses in Galatians chapter 5. The flesh is naturally driven by the desire for power, natural wisdom, for status and dominance, and is as such antagonistic to the way of the Spirit, which produces fruit of an utterly different character. In Galatians chapter 5 verses 20-21, among the works of the flesh, Paul lists enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions and envy.

And these are the sorts of behaviours and traits that are on display in the Corinthian

church, where peace and brotherly love should be prevailing. The Corinthians seem to have exalted impressions of their own maturity, but Paul punctures and deflates these in this passage. Far from being advanced in the ways of the Spirit, they haven't really begun to understand the basics.

The mind of Christ is clearly something that we do not receive suddenly and fully formed. Rather it is something that we must mature and grow in. It is a fruit that must grow within us, as we sow to the Spirit rather than to the flesh.

The Corinthians have received the Spirit, but they haven't really begun to grasp the mind of Christ, that the people of God should participate in by the Spirit. Indeed, they are forming sectarian camps around ministers of Christ like Paul and Apollos, taking the ministry of the undivided Christ himself as an occasion for competitive alignments. Paul wants the Corinthians to be under no illusions about the nature of ministers like him and Apollos.

They are merely servants of their master Jesus Christ, appointed for specific tasks. Apollos was introduced to us in Acts chapter 18 verses 24-28. You can imagine that, with a man as brilliant and learned as Paul and a man as eloquent and charismatic as Apollos, it was entirely natural for people to form camps around them.

Entirely natural, but not spiritual. Paul and Apollos had different but complementary callings. Paul planted the seed and Apollos watered, but God was the one giving the increase.

Ultimately, God's work underlies everything else. Despite diversity of labour, everything is bound together in the one God. Paul returns to this point in chapter 12 verses 4-6.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of service, but the same Lord. And there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.

Ultimately, amidst the diversity of different ministers and gifts, there is one God who is active in everything. Speaking of this diversity of gifts in the Church, Paul also emphasises the unity of divine activity in chapter 12 verse 11. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

And here he is making a similar point in a different way. The man planting and the man watering are unified by a common purpose, and both will be rewarded by their master. They are not each working their own personal field, but they are both labouring on the same field, God's field.

They are collaborating to produce the same fruit, rather than competing against each other. They are fellow workers with God. God is working in and through them.

Apollos and Paul are united expressions of God's work in the field of His Church. They have the same source and the same end. And the Corinthians, rather than pitting the ministers of the Lord against each other, should see themselves as benefiting from their collaboration as the field of the Lord.

Paul now shifts to a building metaphor. Once again, diversity of ministries is an important theme here. The ministers of the Church come from the same source and serve the same end, but do so in diverse ways.

A building built by builders in rivalry with each other would not be a very good building, but nor would a building where everyone was performing exactly the same task. You need a diversity of different ministries. Paul's task was to lay the foundation as a master builder.

No other foundation exists but Christ. And Paul, in this letter, is in many respects returning to inspect that foundation. His concern to this point has been to ensure that the Corinthians are absolutely clear that Christ is the only foundation upon which to build, and that the cross is the shape of this foundation.

Jesus is the Messiah who builds a new tabernacle, and Paul the tentmaker is, like Bezalel, a master builder working upon it. There is going to come a day of testing, revealing the quality of people's work and the foundation that they have built upon. Each one of the Corinthians is building their part of the building with their lives.

And the judgment fire of the day of testing, whether the final great day of the Lord, or a great day of testing in the middle of history, is going to prove what their work truly is. We find similar language concerning a day of judgment in the Prophets. Amos 7, verse 4 Malachi 3, verses 2-3 He is like a refiner's fire, and like fuller's soap.

He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi, and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. When the fire of testing comes, all work done in the flesh will be burned up. The difference between combustible and enduring work will be revealed, and the true character of what we have done will be shown.

It doesn't matter how wise, powerful, influential, or successful we appear to the eyes of men, our true character will be revealed on that day. If we have built with the materials of the flesh, our work, no matter how beautiful it appears on the surface, will be destroyed, as there is nothing enduring to be refined. Such persons may be saved, but only as those snatched from the flames of divine purification.

However, those who have built upon the true foundation, and with good materials, will receive a reward. As Christians, we are to be the builders of the temple of God, working as those who will face a final inspection and test of our labour. And the building image is

sharpened in precisely this way in the following verses.

The building is not just a general building, it is the temple, for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Here it is the whole church that is the temple of the Holy Spirit, whereas in chapter 6 verse 19, the temple is the body of the individual Christian. The Messiah is the temple builder, and the temple he is building is formed of people, and each one of us is building as part of it.

This is imagery that we encounter elsewhere in the Pauline Epistles. In Ephesians chapter 2 verses 19 to 22, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

This temple is holy, and God is jealous for it. If anyone destroys or defiles the temple, God will destroy them. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

And Paul drives home the argument of the end of chapter 1 and the beginning of chapter 2 here, the Corinthians should not delude themselves. True wisdom involves becoming as fools, as we seek God's wisdom over that of this age. God outwits the wise of this age in their wisdom, while establishing a greater wisdom of the Spirit as its true alternative.

In all of this, God demonstrates his supremacy, and nullifies the boasting of man. Paul quotes two Old Testament verses here. Job chapter 5 verse 13 And Psalm 94 verse 11 operate for our well-being under the super-intention of God.

God works in and through them all for his undivided purpose in his Messiah. A question to consider, what can we learn about the final judgment within this passage?