

## “Beneath the Potter’s Hands”

The image of clay in the potter’s hands is one that is well known in our sacred stories. If you’ve ever worked with clay, either on a pottery wheel, or hand thrown, you know the clay must be tended carefully. It must be properly centred on the wheel, have no air bubbles, and be of a smooth consistency. The potter must have precise movements and use just the right amount of water. Too much water and the clay gets sloppy and may topple – too little water and the clay may dry out and crack.

You may remember a pivotal scene in the 1990 movie “Ghost” where Demi Moore is throwing a lump of clay on a potter’s wheel. She is making what appears to be a large, tall vase. Patrick Swayze seated behind her, puts his hand on top of hers and together they romantically throw a pot together. That’s not really what pottery is like. Usually, it’s not neat. And it’s certainly not romantic.

Today’s reading from Jeremiah speaks of a slightly different kind of pottery. Jeremiah is told, by God, to go to the potter’s house and he will hear the voice of God. More specifically, God’s words. And so, Jeremiah goes where he is told and observes the potter at the wheel. The potter was working on a vessel of clay which had failed in the potter’s hands. Then it was reworked into a new and different vessel “as it seemed good to them”.

It makes sense that the image of potter is used to describe God. In the second creation account, Ha’adam, or earthling, is pulled from the clay. From Genesis 2.7, “the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.” God literally pulls the first person from the dust of the ground, or clay.

God has been preparing humanity from the very beginning of humanity!

The second half of the reading for today has a distinctly darker tone. Mentioning the failed vessel, God says “

Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. 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. (Jeremiah 18, 6-8, NRSV)

That is a serious threat...and makes God seem rather fickle. If you do as I tell you to do, all shall be well, but if I change my mind and you annoy me, I will wreak havoc upon you.

This is not the God that we think of today, is it? An angry God, a vengeful God who is as prepared to destroy humanity, as to create it? Keep in mind, these readings are prior to the time of Jesus. God had already been angry enough to threaten the total destruction of humanity, saving only Noah and his family.

God has destroyed the communities of Sodom and Gomorrah. And God was prepared to destroy the known world, as it was in the time of Jeremiah.

Commentaries at this point usually remind us that the Bible is written from a place of allegory or parable, not in a literal way. And for that I am grateful.

However, something that is never mentioned in Scripture is how to prepare clay before it is thrown on a potter's wheel, or cut for hand making pottery bowls, trinkets, etc.

When clay is purchased, it arrives, usually in giant blocks, wrapped in plastic. The potter takes a chunk of clay, usually cut with a metal blade and proceeds to remove any air that may be trapped in the clay. This process is called wedging and is imperative so the clay doesn't explode in the kiln or crack when air drying.

Wedging is when the potter takes the piece of clay needed for their project and squishes it between their hands as though tossing a ball from hand to hand.

Next, the potter takes the ball of clay and throws it onto a proper surface, ideally a slab of concrete or canvas covered hard surface. In a pinch, a clean piece of cardboard will do.

As an undergraduate, the theatre movement class I was in was tasked with making three masks. One from clay, one from a balloon and one from plaster. The plaster mask was the most dangerous as we had to work in teams with strips of plaster, such as those used to cast a broken bone. The person being casted had to apply baby oil to their face first and then lay down while their partner carefully moistened the plaster rolls and applied them to the face. It is worth noting that keeping nostrils open through the plaster is important if you don't want the subject to suffocate while in this process.

The masks made from balloons were of a papier mache variety wherein strips of newspaper or in our case, yellow pages were torn up then applied to an inflated balloon after they were soaked in watered down glue. The application was called decoupage.

Finally, we were given a slab of clay and told to prepare it for "pulling". The instructor told us to hold our slabs of clay over our heads, then throw them onto the cardboard on the floor. I must admit, I missed a few times, so my clay has an unfortunate furry texture to it. For about twenty minutes we slammed clay onto the floor. It is worth noting that we were not told why we had to slam the clay onto the cardboard.

Once the clay was sufficiently softened, we placed it on a table and, blindfolded, began to "pull" a face from the clay. We were not permitted tools aside from our hands and fingernails and were given one hour to pull the face from the clay. Being blindfolded distorted the idea of what I was creating. In my mind's eye the face was freakishly gaunt, with sunken cheeks, protruding eyes, a full mouth and an oddly shaped, upturned nose.

We were each asked to describe what our face was before we were freed from our blindfolds. Every person was shocked when they saw what they had pulled from the clay as it did not resemble what they had described.

We were given the opportunity to wedge the clay again, which we did, to soften it up and then pull with our eyes open. Keeping in mind I was 23 years old and had fairly strong hands, it felt impossible to pull the face from the clay. We were eventually allowed to use simple tools to carve clay away from what we were crafting, as well as pulling from the clay.

When I read today's passage, I am reminded of the sheer force of labour it takes to pull from clay. The sheer force of labour it takes to wedge the clay properly. And the incredible skill and patience it takes to throw clay on a potter's wheel.

Speaking of labour, did you know that Canada is to thank for the observation of Labour Day?

The first Monday in September has been an official holiday in Canada since 1894, and in the United States since 1892. But the origin of Labour Day came 20 years before that, when unions started holding parades and rallies in Toronto and Ottawa to celebrate the successful 1872 Toronto printers' strike – the original “fight for fairness” that won major changes including the decriminalisation of unions in Canada.

Today, Labour Day marks the unofficial end to summer and the start of a new school year for children in Canada and the United States. It is a day of rest and, for unions and labour activists, a day to celebrate the accomplishments of the labour movement and the benefits of having a union at work.

But, as is the case with most holidays, the origins of Labour Day come from the struggles of working people and the demand for fairness. In this case, it was the movement to establish a 9-hour work day (the standard was a 12-hour work day and a 6-day work week) and a strike by printers in Toronto in the spring of 1872 to get it.

In 1882, an American labour leader witnessed the annual May “labour day” festivities in Toronto which inspired him to organise the first American “labour day” on September 5 that same year. The popularity of the event spread across the country.

By the time President Grover Cleveland declared the first Monday of September as an official federal holiday in 1894, 30 states were already celebrating Labour Day.

In Canada, pressure had been mounting to declare a national labour holiday. On July 23, 1894 the government of Prime Minister John Thompson passed a law making Labour Day official. A huge parade took place in Winnipeg that year and the tradition of a Labour Day celebration quickly spread across Canada. (from canadianlabour.ca)

And so, imagine God holding a huge ball of clay over their head and throwing it onto a huge slab of concrete. Doing this over and over and over again, ensuring that water is added to keep the clay from sticking to the slab of concrete and throwing it enough that the bubbles are all removed.

Then, with eyes wide open, God lovingly pulls each of us from the clay. Carving our features away from the clay, smoothing sharp edges and nuancing details that make each of us unique and hand-made. Even with twins, no two are absolutely identical.

It is no wonder that a woman, preparing for childbirth, is said to be labouring.

As we remember those who toiled for fair wages, safe working conditions, a standardised work week and standardised working day, let us give thanks for those who have gone before us.

As Jesus laboured with humanity, as clay in a potter's hands,  
As our mothers laboured through breath and clenched teeth,  
As we labour in our lives to live as God intends,  
Let us give thanks. Amen.

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Sermon for Labour Day – 4th September 2022 – Jeremiah 18.1-11