



"Who's going to bring the pies?" is a familiar question at holiday time for family gatherings. Some people have the knack of making that wonderful flaky, melt-in-your-mouth pie crust that holds in and absorbs all the flavors of apples, pecans or whatever the favorite pie is in your household. I've never understood the people who don't eat the crust! And yet for some of us, making a pie crust seems a bit like "who is God going to laugh at today?" It either turns out right the first time or throw away the dough and start all over. No middle ground. No patches in my pie

crust, thank you very much!

The latest "trick" I've heard is to use a little vodka for the liquid- apparently something in the alcohol causes the crust to work. For some, life is a bit like this: if only you know the "trick" life will go smoothly and you will get everything you want. Most of us know – at least I hope we do- that there really isn't a trick that will, for minimal effort, result in an easy life where we have everything we ever dreamed of. Life is sometimes very hard, with broken pieces and broken dreams. It isn't always easy following the way of Jesus.

The reading from Jeremiah is probably familiar to many of us. And, if we read it closely, we may read things that we may not have focused on as the words raise some troubling ideas about our relationship with God.

"Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel." Ok, that sounds good so far. We speak a lot about God being with us all the time. But then listen: "At one moment I may declare a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck it up and break down and destroy it.." Wow! Now God sounds pretty arbitrary and pretty destructive. Definitely not the God I want to follow. And then God goes on: "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." Maybe not so bad: God watches what I do and if I repent and turn back to God, God will change and disaster will not happen. Still and all, it sounds like God is waiting with a ruler to smack my knuckles if I goof up but will not smack me if I recognize where I go wrong and straighten up. I'm still, though, locked in an adversarial relationship with God, under God's thumb, and fearful of punishment.

How does the image of a potter help us work out how we think and talk about God and about our relationship with God?

A potter generally sits or stands with a wheel that turns by the potter using his foot. The wet clay is put on the turning wheel and then potter begins to shape the wet clay into the desired shape.

The potter needs to have a vision before she starts - what is this clay going to be. A vase- large or small, tall and thin or round and squat. A chalice into which wine can be poured and then drunk by all representing the blood of Christ poured out for all for the forgiveness of sins. Or perhaps a

small plate to hold the bread, broken for us to remind us all that life surmounts death even as life can be painful and sorrowful.

Whatever the potter's vision, the clay doesn't always cooperate. Sometimes the clay has too much moisture and it won't hold up but rather slumps over. Sometimes the clay has too little moisture and it won't hold together -just breaks apart and crumbles. In those cases, the potter can smush the clay down into a lump and start over- pushing and pulling and working delicately with fingers to shape the clay into the desired shape and purpose. And sometimes, if the clay has too much moisture, the potter has to wait for some of the moisture to evaporate until the clay can be worked. If the clay has dried out too much, sometimes there is nothing to be done but to throw it out and get a new batch.

Even assuming that the potter is able to shape and push and lift the lump of clay into the desired shape, the next step of firing the clay has its own uncertainties and anxieties. If desired, a potter may glaze the pot before firing. Glazing can be done by dipping the piece in liquid glaze or using certain fumes that stick to the raw pot or dusting minute bits of color or texture on the raw pot. Glazing allows the pot to hold water or other liquid as an unglazed pot will usually be porous. Glazing allows the raw pot to take on color and finish and texture. Through glazing, what is a raw, matte usually not very pretty pot can become luxuriantly beautiful.

But glazing isn't the final step. Firing in a kiln heated to 1000 degrees or more is required to "finish" the pot. But a lot can go wrong during the firing process. Sometimes you take out a pot that is cracked- still pretty but not usable for the purpose intended. Sometimes the pot simply disintegrates- something went wrong in the creative process and the pot is destroyed, of no use to anyone- or is it?

Jewish folklore talks of a potter ending up with shards and minute bits of a pot that shattered. One option is to simply throw the bits out. No good to anyone or for anything. Another option is to sweep up the bits and work them into the next pot that the potter works. That next piece, then, carries within it the seeds of the past- those hard lessons learned when life fell apart.

Think also about the art that you like. Do you like only things that are smooth and shiny? Do you sometimes like things that have texture- bumps in them that reflect light differently? Do you like one color or perhaps combinations of colors? Sometimes the bumpy, rough parts of art are what make them unique and valuable.

So, too, in our relationship with God and with each other. Sometimes it is the bumpy, rough parts that help us see when and where and how we need to re-form. To re-consider who and whose we are and how we act towards one another.

Jesus leaves us with a hard message. Does he literally mean that we cannot be followers of Christ unless we hate our father and mother? Does he mean if our life flows smoothly and we do not seem to have a cross to bear that we cannot be a disciple? I think the answer is more nuanced than the words on the page suggest.

Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139: 1-5, 12-17; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33

Jesus is repeating what he has said before - and will say again. Where is your focus? What are your priorities? If you love God first and foremost, then your relationships with God and with family and with neighbors fall into their proper place and drive the life you live.

None of us gets this right all the time, though. Our pots have cracks and sometimes break into smithereens- seemingly worthless to us and for any purpose. Our pie crusts have lots of patches and are heavy when they should be light and flaky.

Even then, though, God the potter can find ways to patch us up or to use what is broken. God has searched us out and knows us. God knows our sitting down and our rising up. Even then, we have value to the potter and to God. Whether we are smooth and shiny and everything in our life seems to go along just fine-or whether we are lumpy, and bumpy, cracked and the glaze ran when it wasn't supposed to, we have value to God.

I'm reminded of making hand prints in wet clay as a child. Kept in places of honor on the wall in the hallway. Pretty ragged and rough. Colors weren't always smooth or shiny. But valued because you or your child made it. God values us because God made us. Maybe God has a wall where God keeps all those clay handprints until we are rejoined with God following our death. Waiting- waiting- for us to know that we have value whether we are shiny and smooth or bumpy and the colors run. *Amen.*