

“Did He Mean Hate?”
St. Paul’s UCC Church
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Friends in Christ....

The Old Testament has four so-called major prophets. They are considered major because of the number of chapters in each, and they are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Jeremiah has 52 chapters. There are also 12 minor prophets who have only a few chapters each. Jeremiah prophesized shortly before the Babylonian Empire overran the southern kingdom of Judah. And it was a message of doom and gloom. He was about as popular as the plague.

I don’t know about you, but almost every time I encounter the prophet Jeremiah, I am reminded the Three Dog Night hit tune that started out: “Jeremiah was a bullfrog.” This Jeremiah definitely was not a bullfrog. The people probably wished he was.

In the 18th chapter of Jeremiah, God uses the image of a potter at his wheel to make his point. It was a vivid image that the people were familiar with and understand. Skilled potters are downright amazing in their ability to move their fingers and hands ever-so-slightly only to yield dramatic results on the spinning lump of earth. Several years ago we attended the Minnesota Renaissance Festival and saw potters doing their magic on the lumps of clay while creating wares to sell. Hear now how God uses this image to give the people a message from Jeremiah 18:

Jeremiah 18:1-11 (CEB)

God the Potter

18 Jeremiah received the LORD’s word: ²Go down to the potter’s house, and I will give you instructions about what to do there. ³So I went down to the potter’s house; he was working on the potter’s wheel. ⁴But the piece he was making was flawed while still in his hands, so the potter started on another, as seemed best to him. ⁵Then the LORD’s word came to me: ⁶House of Israel, cannot I deal with you like this potter, declares the LORD? Like clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in mine, house of Israel! ⁷At any time I may announce that I will dig up, pull down, and destroy a nation or kingdom; ⁸but if that nation I warned turns from its evil, then I will relent and not carry out the harm I intended for it. ⁹At the same time, I may announce that I will build and plant a nation or kingdom; ¹⁰but if that nation displeases and disobeys me, then I will relent and not carry out the good I intended for it. ¹¹Now say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem: This is what the LORD says: I am a potter preparing a disaster for you; I am working out a plan against you. So each one of you, turn from your evil ways; reform your ways and your actions.

Potters who were Jeremiah’s contemporaries made things like bricks, lamps and toys, as well as cooking pots, and even jewelry. Because they used pottery for so many different things, pottery making was one of the earliest and most widespread and familiar of ancient Israel’s

crafts. In fact, they even mass-produced some both useful and attractive pottery. So when Jeremiah talks about a potter and his pottery, he uses imagers that are very familiar to the people of that day.

Skilled potters make it look easy, but any novice at the wheel knows how deceptive that it is; one wrong application of pressure from your left thumb can be enough to turn a nicely developing object into a collapsed mess. The skilled potters can also be remarkable how quickly they can rescue such a mess by instantly starting to fashion a whole new object.

It is helpful to recall that Jeremiah's ministry spanned the years just prior to, during, and after the fall of Jerusalem. The trauma of anticipating, experiencing, and acclimating to war and its aftermath have a devastating effect, not only on the nation, but on God and the prophet as well. The relationship between the three is so close, so intertwined that what happens to either affects them all. God is not so far removed, so aloof, so transcendent that God is unaffected by what happens in the human realm. Quite the contrary, God not only commands, but responds to people, individuals, and nations, according to their response to the divine.

A potter working with clay is an everyday occurrence in the ancient world. As a result of his watching a mundane task, a potter at work, Jeremiah receives God's instruction to issue a call for repentance. This call for repentance includes an unequivocal warning that the consequences for failure to honor God can be severe.

Why this call for repentance? The specific sins of Judah and Jerusalem that are mentioned in the 17th chapter of Jeremiah are for the worship of other gods and gaining wealth through unjust or oppressive means. These two accusations of guilt are intertwined. For example, Jeremiah 5:26-28 accuses Judah of becoming rich by taking goods of other, of failing to care for those who are economically and socially vulnerable in their society, such as orphans and the poor. Since covenant law makes specific provisions for care of these individuals, abandoning the God of Israel to worship other gods likely also meant abandoning the laws of the covenant that were intended for community and individual flourishing. Living according to the law of God involves the economic well-being of those in the community as an issue of moral integrity.

In our text from Jeremiah 18, we hear that God did not simply shape us once for all. To this day, God tells Jeremiah that God's people are like clay that has not yet been fired. As we too go down into the potter's shed, we may learn the difference between clay that has been fired and clay that has not yet been fired. It is this: clay that has been fired dries, shrinks, and hardens into a permanent structure and shape. It may be decorative, but it is often functional, and is most often designed for a single purpose. Such clay, now a dry ceramic is often useful. It is specialized. It is also rigid and brittle.

Clay that has not been fired is plastic. It may be shaped and reshaped and infinite number of times. It is a material of possibility, moldable, flexible, and responsive. The clay's nature is to resist attempts to be made into something beautiful or something useful. So necessary is this dance between the potter's strength and positioning, the firm centering and handling of the clay, and the delicate yet certain pressure of the hands that a lapse in any of these elements will leave

the clay torn and pieces of it flung to the floor. Pottery is a contact sport that requires resolve, care, and the ability to meet the resistance of the clay with patience, calm, and intention.

One can see how God uses this symbol to talk about his people Israel. To think of God as a potter is an interesting image. He is attempting to mold them into shape, but they are resistant, and because of their stubbornness, bad things are going to happen as a result of their actions.

Clay can be symbolic of other things. For example, some of you may remember the 1961 Eugene McDaniels hit record “100 Pounds of Clay”, a song that was covered by several other artists. Basically, it is a love song of how God took a 100 pounds of clay and created women to be loved by men.

Enough about clay as we turn to our gospel text from Luke 14:25-33. The scene is familiar as Jesus is among a crowd on the road to Jerusalem as he questions people’s abilities and willingness to be truly committed to discipleship. In our passage, Jesus warns that following him will require that disciples “hate” their family members and even life itself, choosing instead the path of the cross. Hear now these harsh words and a pair of short parables.

Gospel: Luke 14:25-33 (CEB)

Discipleship’s Demands

²⁵ Large crowds were traveling with Jesus. Turning to them, he said, ²⁶ “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, spouse and children, and brothers and sisters—yes, even one’s own life—cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ Whoever does not carry their own cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

²⁸ “If one of you wanted to build a tower, would not you first sit down and calculate the cost, to determine whether you have enough money to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when you have laid the foundation but could not finish the tower, all who see it will begin to belittle you. ³⁰ They will say, ‘Here is the person who began construction and could not complete it!’ ³¹ Or what king would go to war against another king without first sitting down to consider whether his ten thousand soldiers could go up against the twenty thousand coming against him? ³² And if he did not think he could win, he would send a representative to discuss terms of peace while his enemy was still a long way off. ³³ In the same way, none of you who are unwilling to give up all of your possessions can be my disciple.

May God bless our hearing of his holy word. Amen.

John Pilch, a Biblical scholar, wrote that: “On the face of it, Jesus seems to propose three devastating and inhuman requirements for becoming his disciple; to hate one’s family, to carry the cross, and to give up all possessions. As usual, the literary context and a culturally appropriate reading scenario help us “foreigners” to better understand our strange-sounding ancestors in faith.

The Middle Eastern understanding of “meals” helps a “foreigner” to understand Jesus’ comments on discipleship in today’s reading. A follower of Jesus who ceased “networking” by

means of meals would jeopardize a family's very existence. The disciple must then choose between allegiance to the family and allegiance to Jesus. Choosing Jesus is thus the equivalent of letting one's family go, thus "hating" the family. Hate is more suitably translated as "prefer," that is, one who "hate" the family actually prefers another group to the family. In the tight-knit nature of the Middle Eastern family, the ideal marriage partner was a first cousin." Families were everything.

Jesus is warning the crowd that to follow him meant that families could not come first. He was first to be followed and that would most likely create all kinds of dissension. He uses hate, not as a term of intense dislike, but as a preference.

Jesus is not telling us that we have to walk away from our loved ones and break all ties for his sake. What is being said is that we have to take serious consideration of the people and things that have the most influence and control over the shapes of our lives. You might say that in a round-about way he is talking about idols (small i): the things we love, serve, and allow to weigh heavily on our decisions under the guise of the "needs of our circumstances."

Jesus uses the example of the family in this passage because he knows that although the family can be the source of life's richest joys, it can also be the place we feel we are "being put to death" by conflicts, brokenness, and losses. Jesus knows that we can easily fall into the temptation of trying to make our life with our friends and our church an island of security and peace. Often, we prefer to be shielded from horrible stuff happening in the world. Jesus wants us to be aware there is only one Savior. Instead of simply hearing Jesus today say, "Give up all your possessions," perhaps it would be insightful to also hear, "Give up ON all your possessions." They will never save you. They will never bring you lasting joy and fulfillment.

Jesus asks the crowd to count the cost of following him just as they would count the cost of building a tower. The one who fails to count the cost and then cannot complete the building project will suffer ridicule for his incompetency and shortsightedness. Then he goes on as asks what king would go to battle with insufficient troops? What are the consequences of not counting the cost? These brief parables require the traveling crowd use their common sense. They do not have to be builders by trade or kings to identify with the stories. The moral of the parables is that not one of them can be Jesus' disciple without giving up all of his or her possessions.

Discipleship does have a cost. But it does have a reward for each one of us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.