

Bible Study
Proper 18, Year C
September 4, 2016

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

Jeremiah 18:1-11

The potter, the wheel, and the clay – one of the most beautiful and enduring metaphors for our creative and creating God in all of Scripture. The potter does not only mold and shape fresh clay at the wheel; the potter remakes his creations when they become spoiled and broken. The potter's work of creation is continuous. The potter's house is a locus of genesis and renewal, death and rebirth, beauty and adaptation. When we find ourselves in the presence of this creative continuity, we can hear God's holy words.

The clay, and by extension the vessel being shaped, becomes what it is in each new moment only through the imagination of the potter. Thus its very being depends upon the potter's will. And although human beings may not understand the potter God's movements and intentions, we can remember that the potter does only that which "seem[s] good to him" (vs. 4). The potter reworks his spoiled creations, but he never discards or destroys the clay.

- What might it mean that Jeremiah can only hear God's words in this place of re/creation?
- Where do we encounter God's creative energy, and what messages might we receive in its presence?
- In verses 8 and 10, God speaks of the ability to "change [God's own] mind." How does the concept of changing one's mind fit (or not fit) with our usual ideas of God's character and existence?

Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17

These verses from Psalm 139 describe how intimately God knows each one of us. The juxtaposition of opposites in the first two verses illustrates the extent of God's knowledge – God knows the fullness of our being, the extremes and the in-betweens, the highs and the lows. Accepting this level of intimacy may be both breathtakingly beautiful and "too wonderful" for us. God knows our basest instincts and desires, but God also knows the amazing love, joy, and peace in our truest hearts. God knows our full potential even when we are unable to see it ourselves.

Verse 13 reminds us that, as God's creations, we are glorious. Our essential and innate goodness reflects the quality of divine craftsmanship. There's no escaping the truth: I am marvelously made, and so are you. You are wonderful, and so am I. There are no asterisks here, no "except for..." no ifs, ands, or buts. The Psalmist helps us realize that we can never honor and glorify God while maligning or debasing ourselves and each other.

- The language of creativity is prominent in these verses: “knit” in vs. 12, “woven” in vs. 14, “written” and “fashioned” in vs. 15. How can these metaphors deepen our understanding of and relationship with our Creator?
- Consider the various references to bodies in verses 12 through 15. How might these references inform our attitudes toward human bodies generally and our own bodies specifically?

Philemon 1-21

The Letter to Philemon is one of the shortest epistles in the New Testament – there are only four verses not included here, comprised of Paul’s request for a guest room, closing greetings, and benediction. But within this comparatively brief letter we find a passionate illustration of historic evangelism which may challenge us to rethink our notions of faithful living. In verse 5, Paul says that he thanks God not because of how the church is growing in numbers or power but because he has heard of the members’ love. He goes on to say that this love is manifested through the sharing of faith and refreshing of hearts (vs. 6-7).

Paul indicates that love is the only worthy basis upon which he will appeal to his fellow Christ-followers, and he asks them to do something patently irrational and illogical – to welcome Onesimus, a former slave, as “a beloved brother” (vs. 16). He then goes a step further, declaring that he will accept Onesimus’s debts as his own and repay them. This kind of selfless sacrifice makes no sense to those whose ultimate measure is money, or honor, or status; but to those whose ultimate measure is love, it is both right and perfectly natural.

- How can we live, what must we do, for others to hear of our love? Conversely, what has another person or group of people done that has led us to hear of their love?
- Paul vouches for Onesimus, calls him “my own heart” (vs. 12), and pledges to take on his debts, whatever they may be. For whom (if anyone) might we be willing to give of ourselves similarly? And what does Paul’s selfless generosity tell us about the community of believers?

Luke 14:25-33

When Jesus speaks about the costs of discipleship, we may be tempted to make excuses for ourselves. His words are unsettling. All this talk of hating family, of bearing burdens and doing hard work, of giving up our stuff – it’s challenging to hear. Which probably means, of course, that we need to pay special attention. Here is a message with which we must wrestle, if we seek to follow the one we claim as Messiah and Savior.

Verse 26’s use of the word “hate” may be especially troubling. How can Jesus ask us to “hate” anyone, never mind our own parents and children? A comparative look at the Greek text, along with the conventions of Biblical language and the passage’s context, is useful here. In the preceding verses, Jesus shares the parable of the Great Dinner (when the invited guests make up excuses, and the host opens his home to “the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame”). Those whose attachments control them miss out on the glorious banquet. This is the context for the “hating” in verse 26. Elsewhere in Scripture, we can find instances of the word “hate” being

used for dramatic emphasis in comparison (i.e. Genesis 29, where Leah is “hated” because Jacob cares more for Rachel than for her). Jesus is not telling us to cease loving those around us or to harden our hearts; but we cannot put anyone or anything above his Gospel of selfless, unmitigated love if we are to be true disciples.

- What does it mean to be a disciple? How is a disciple different from a friend, supporter, admirer, student, or fan?
- Consider the language of “completion” and “finishing” in verses 28-30. What work might Jesus be calling us to complete, and when/why might we be tempted to back down prematurely?

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