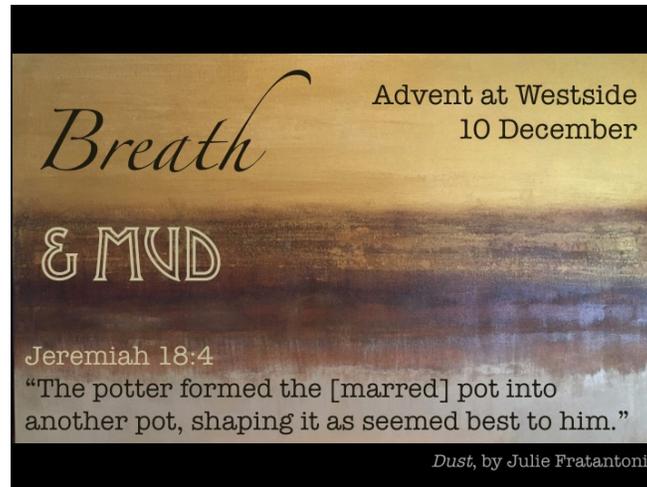


**Changing the Story; Series: Breath and Mud**

Jeremiah 18:1-11

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I haven't done a lot of work with clay – really none... but I do like to work with dough – to make a good pie crust, especially. My mom is a pie baker, and I love her pie crust.



She would always leave little bits of the dough for us to eat – the trimmings. Or she'd roll it out, butter it, sprinkle cinnamon and sugar on it and bake it. I have an early memory, though, of a pie dough batch failing for my mom. Sometimes, you just need to add a little more flour or a little more water to make it right, but I don't know, maybe she had forgotten to add the salt, and maybe my siblings and I were getting on her nerves, or she'd had an argument with Dad... For whatever reason, it didn't work, and she hucked that failed batch of pie dough across the kitchen and into the sink. It was useless.

Not so with clay. A potter working with clay on a wheel doesn't throw out the clay. A potter works with the clay, spinning the wheel... and if something doesn't turn out quite right, the potter can rework, reshape, re-spin, until the pot emerges according to the potter's design.



Last week, we started this series in the book of Genesis with the story of Adam and Eve and their beginnings. We read the story of God forming the first humans from the dust of the ground and breathing into them the breath of life. God shaped humanity on the wheel of creation... and they became marred in his hands. There are times throughout the story of Scripture where it certainly seems like God hucked nearly the whole batch of humanity into the sink... think, the flood. Think, vast swaths of Israelites decimated by diseases and plagues and death angels and conquering nations throughout their deliverance, wandering, establishment, and eventual exile. But, taken as a whole, the story of God and God's people is a story of working and wetting and re-working and starting over and kneading and working again. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel" (Jer. 18:6).

There is a strong call in this text toward malleability – toward being supple and responsive to the shaping, the molding, the purposing of the potter. The danger always is that we might harden ourselves against the shaping and forming ways of the Potter. The danger is that we might hop off the wheel and into the kiln and forever harden in our ways.



There's a couple of ways that this can happen. One of the ways we can harden is by not repenting, by persisting in doing evil. The last verse that we read this morning (v. 11) says, "So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions." The Hebrew for turn is *shuv*. Repent... turn. This is also in verse 8... "If a nation that I warned repents of its evil, turns from its evil, *shuvs*... then I will relent and not inflict on it disaster." To harden is to persist in doing evil...

There is another way we can harden, and that is to avoid obedience. "If ... I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight *and does not obey me*, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it" (vv. 9-10). You might say, isn't that the same thing? Isn't refusing to repent the same thing as refusing to obey? Sometimes. But did you know that you can be very obedient (in the sense of piousness) and not obey at the same time? You can be very, very good... very, very moral... upright... minding your Ps and Qs – and still not be obeying God. These are what we call sins of omission. Sins of *commission* are the wrong things we do / the acts that we do that we should not do... and sins of *omission* are when we omit doing the good that God has called us to do.

This, too, is a hardening of our hearts... a premature satisfaction with our sanctification. A determination that I'm shaped as much as I want to be shaped. Let's just hop off this wheel and into the fire and call it good. Obedience to the potter, on the other hand, means a continual shaping... a shaving off of the sins of commission, but a forming and an emerging and a developing of a life of obedience to God's call to follow him in all sorts of ways. And what are those ways? (Lots of places in Scripture that talk about these ways... here's one - Isaiah 58:)

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice

and untie the cords of the yoke,

to set the oppressed free

and break every yoke?

<sup>7</sup> Is it not to share your food with the hungry

and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—

when you see the naked, to clothe them,

and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? ...

"If you do away with the yoke of oppression,

with the pointing finger and malicious talk,

<sup>10</sup> and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry

and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,  
then your light will rise in the darkness,  
and your night will become like the noonday.

I titled this message *Changing the Story* because that is what is going on in this passage from Jeremiah. God is showing us here that he is not finished with us yet. God is showing us here that the stories of our lives, just like the story of Israel, just like the story of clay on a wheel, can change. And this gives us hope. When we feel marred/crumpled/useless, this gives us hope.

This changing of the story is based both on the action of the potter with his hands on the clay... *AND* it is also changed based on the actions (or inactions) of the clay. The clay in this metaphor is not passive. The clay in this metaphor has the breath of life in it. There is an interplay between the work of God and the hearts of the people. A responsiveness that goes both ways – almost like the hands and the clay are dance partners. Certainly the hands of the potter are leading and have the final say over it all, but the clay affects the direction and the shape and the movement of the hands.

The story can change. We can repent... *shuv*... turn away from our evil acts or turn away from our hardened self-righteousness and toward God's call of radical love. And it also seems that God turns and re-works the situation. In verse 4, the Hebrew word, *shuv* is there describing God's action as well... the potter 'formed' it into another pot... the Hebrew... work-turn... re-work... The story can keep changing, but always bending toward the ultimate story of shalom that God intends.

*Changing the Story* is, of course, the motto for the efforts of World Renew (refer to ornaments).



Changing  
the Story

The logo features the words "Changing the Story" in a handwritten, orange font. To the right of the text is a grey circular arrow that starts at the top right and curves back to the top right, pointing towards the text.

When we contribute to the work of World Renew, we are saying no to hardening. We are saying no to the cynical attitude 'It is what it is.' No! It does not have to be the way it is. The marring of the clay is not the end of the story. The hardening of the clay is not the end of the story. The stories of poverty and famine and sickness and war can be changed.

This truth is the hope and the dream that beats at the heart of the work of the Friends of Refugees committee. We can look back and see how the story was changed for the Weldemariam family. (Share pictures of the Weldemariams from two years ago...



and news and a picture of how the family is doing now).



Their story was changed. And now, we are working to help change the story of another family: Mwajuma, Selemani, Styveen, Ismail.

A litany that churches all throughout our denomination are reading today which is all about the openness to the story changing:

Abraham and Sarah did not know whether their visitors meant harm or good, still they opened their tent in welcome, and they were blessed. From the stranger, we hear the good news of God's covenant love.

**We praise you for the blessing of the stranger.**

Boaz saw in Ruth not a project, but a partner. From the stranger, we are given the lineage of Christ.

**We praise you for the blessing of the stranger.**

The man lay dying on the Jericho road until the strange and reviled Samaritan came to his aid sharing his oil and wine. From the stranger, we receive help and healing.

**We praise you for the blessing of the stranger.**

When the people of Israel were strangers in Egypt, only as valuable as the bricks they produced for Pharaoh's economy, God heard their cry and saved them. When we are strangers, we come to know a God who frees us.

**We praise you for the blessing of the stranger.**

Christ hides in the face of the stranger, reminding us that "I was a stranger, and you welcomed me." In the stranger, we can experience the presence of Christ.

**We praise you for the blessing of the stranger.**

We are called in Scripture, again and again, to welcome the stranger and the many blessings that the stranger may bring.

**For the immigrant, the refugee, the one we do not know, we give our thanks and praise. The family of God is worshiping you in many languages, and following you in many cultures, all over the world. But the diversity of the family of God has also come right here to this community. May we receive the blessings you bring to us, Lord, through the gift of the stranger.**

You see, when we believe that the story can change for us, we believe that the story can change for others. And in all of this story-changing – in all this openness to the surprising work of the potter, it turns out that our stories and their stories get changed in all sorts of surprising ways.

Next week, we're going to be turning the page to the New Testament and we'll read the story of Gabriel's announcement to Mary (and her reaction) and how, in Jesus, the story was changed in the ways that people were hoping for and in the ways that people didn't even know they were hoping for. Jesus is the Great Story Changer. He was the great story changer when he was born... when he became the firstborn from the dead. Jesus *is* the great story changer now, as he is formed in us. And Jesus will be the great story changer when he returns and makes all things new. Thanks be to God.