



## **Sermons from Northwood United Church**

**“Come to the Potters House”  
Jeremiah 18:1-11 , Luke 14:25-33  
Will Sparks                      September 8, 2013**

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives, be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

This Sunday in the church goes by many different names. In my years as a minister we have called it, welcome back Sunday, welcoming people to a new season in the life of our community. I've never been completely ok with that because it so summarily dismisses some of the most faithful folk in the church who have attended regularly all summer. Its been called Re-covenanting Sunday, recognizing that with a new season in our life together, there is a renewal of a community covenant to be together in the many activities and life we share together. Nice, but kind of churchy. We've decided this year to go with the football metaphor and call it Kick-off Sunday, the day when the fall program kicks off, children's church, choirs and music groups, study groups all kick off today and in the next couple of weeks. And we hope that there is a sense of warmth and welcome, and we hope oldtimers feel the goodness of being together after times of holidays, and we hope that newcomers sense the glow of a community that celebrates the Spirit in warm and welcoming ways. And so to go with all that, we need warm welcoming readings and a warm and fuzzy message to pull it all together.

Would that it were so. This morning, the scriptures come crashing into this cozy picture like a cold wet wind cutting short a glorious Indian summer. All this talk about the potter who is able to both create and to crush, build and to tear apart, devise good and rain down evil upon us. This, of course, is a powerful image of God, the potter. Come down to the potters house where the potter, the Creator is engaged in creation I some frightening, even threatening kind of ways.

Admittedly, this is one of the most intimate images of God found in Scripture, God the potter has hands deep in the clay. Here you get the sense that if you look closely enough at the creation you might actually see divine finger prints. But at the same time God is pictured here in very human-like terms. The Creator may well not like the way the clay is turning out and may just scrap the project altogether. The prophet's threatening tone reflects the threatening times in which it was written. Jeremiah was writing around 600 years before Jesus came along. The people had been through a conflict with Egypt to the south and the rising nation of Babylon to the north loomed large. The people thought that God would hold them safe in Jerusalem, but Jeremiah says no. Our God, the one you think will protect you against the south and the north may just scrap this project and start over, like a potter, re-working the clay, re-creating from scratch.

As a social and political metaphor, which it originally was, it is pretty harsh, invested as everyone would be in the status quo. But as a religious metaphor, the power of the image of God intimately holding the clay has a tenderness to it. How has your life been molded and shaped. Sometimes the shaping comes in harsh lessons, mistakes that hurt and bend us, tragedies that mark us, losses that leave us changed, and sometimes the Creator works us over time to become sturdy, strong, sound, and beautiful. The wheel spins, and we are shaped, and the hand of God is felt in the shaping. There is also a reassuring sense in this metaphor that God is never quite finished with us, just as we are never quite finished with God. There is hope here even when things are spinning out of control, that the Creator is at the wheel, has a hand in, is committed to the project. The question is, are we committed to the project too.

That is Jesus' question in the gospel reading. I know, I too flinched at the "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple" bit. Feels unnecessarily harsh to me. Surely he was engaging in exaggeration for the sake of the point. This is after all the same guy who called us to love with our heart and soul, mind and strength, and I believe that would include your family. But reading on, he's talking about the level of commitment to the Way. You can't hold back, or it doesn't work. This is a total commitment faith, requiring our all. He's pointing to our half-heartedness. As we are committed to the creation as the Creator. If the potter is all in, how about the clay? Are we going to bend in the potter's hand or are we going to resist when it starts to feel like it costs too much, doesn't quite look the way we had hoped, is taking an unexpected turn.

We have a season of life in front of us. Kick off Sunday or whatever we call it, is a time to look forward and imagine the hand of God at work in our life and in the life of our community- to see ourselves as clay, and God as the one doing the shaping. All the activities and projects we engage shape who we become. We, as individuals, are a work in the hands of the Creator. As a community, we are a vessel, a container, holding life but shaped by it as well. And just as an example, we don't need to look far to see that we are facing a life shaping situation in our building. I look at it and there is no way forward that I can imagine that does not include some molding, some re-shaping, some feeling pushed, some discomfort. Yet this is the very kind of thing, the very kind of life circumstance that tests our commitment to the project, and has the power to re-shape us. If throughout this coming season we can see ourselves as clay in the hands of the potter, if we can practice trusting the hand of the potter, if we can receive the challenge, the bending, the stress of life not primarily as threat but rather as a sign that we are being shaped and reshaped, then this vessel will be fine. We must always remember that we are the clay. We are not the wheel, nor are we the potter. We are the clay. And the best way we can participate in our own creation is by feeling the way gravity and life pushes us, and yielding to the hand of the Creator.

It is true in this journey of the soul that we are on as individuals as well. We are not the wheel, nor the potter. We are the clay. It is tempting to try to control the spin of the wheel. The more I live the more I believe that most of life is lived not in initiating things, in making this happen, but in response. We don't so much create our life but respond to the life that is being created in us. Yes, we can make significant choices that alter the course of our life, but so much of life is just handed to us. It is ours to respond. As life happens, we can choose to lean in to the power of love or lean away from it, lean in to the influence of grace and forgiveness or shy away from it, lean in to the life shaping influence of hope or pull back in fear. Love, grace, forgiveness, hope, these are the fingerprints of God on our life. These are the ways in which the hand of the creator is at work, intimately molding who we are becoming.

So in the coming weeks and month, through all that you face and through all that we face together, I want to invite you to come down to the potter's house, to let yourself be clay, to practice the art of being the clay, to throw yourself into life, yours and ours together, to be attentive to the hand of the potter as it kneads you and shapes you, and to be particularly attentive to the fingerprints of love, grace, forgiveness and hope left behind by the potter. I promise you, they are there. Amen.