

September 4, 2022
Year C; Proper 18
Jeremiah 18: 1-11
Psalm 139: 1-5, 12-17
Luke 14: 25-33

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

Our reading from Jeremiah is one of the most loved and familiar, this image of God as a potter, gently forming us, working and reworking the clay of our lives, our lives as faithful people, as Christians. The image is so tangible, we can just picture God leaning over the potter’s wheel, shaping each vessel, each creation, each of us.

However, as often happens, our understanding of this passage leans toward God and each of us, when the passage actually focuses on God and God’s people, plural, God’s community. As an Old Testament passage, the prophet Jeremiah receives this word from the Lord about the house of Israel.

We do well to hear this passage as not just about Israel, but as a word to us too, but not as individuals, as Megan or as Deb, but as Trinity, as SMWC, and as our life together, the two churches, as God’s church, as God’s community of faith.

Last January, eight months ago, at the Annual meeting of Trinity and at the Annual meeting of SMWC, we began a discussion of how our churches function. As two yoked churches, Trinity and SMWC function as completely separate churches that share one priest, and one church office.

I observed that, after five years of ministry with the two churches, the rector spends an inordinate amount of time doing many things twice. These things can be the numerous administrative functions like planning two annual meetings, completing two parochial reports for the Diocese. And doing things twice also includes working with two vestries, two discretionary

accounts, two sets of endowments, two outreach efforts, two stewardship campaigns, two scholarship committees, just to name a few.

I did not speak to these double duties for the rector to complain, but rather to address whether the churches get the best use of their shared rector, who must use daily time doing double duties, rather than developing Christian formation programs, leading book groups and bible studies and prayer groups, offering additional non-Sunday worship opportunities, expanding outreach, and on and on.

Our Annual Meetings have led to numerous conversations and have sprouted several new ways of doing things together, including shared worship services, working together on Outreach projects like our concert for Special Olympics and our school supply drive.

In addition, this week the newly formed Joint Budget Committee will meet for the first time to create the budget that covers the expenses the two churches share.

We are in the midst of God's work with us, SMWC and Trinity, as God the potter reshapes us, reworks us.

However, you likely noticed the language in Jeremiah, as God forms and reforms the clay, it is not all sunshine and roses! There is an urgency in the passage and a strong word of judgment:

Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, 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.

We tend to like the gentle image of a potter shaping the vessel, but not so

much of the potter scraping the clay off the wheel, and throwing it away! To the Old Testament tone of judgment, one commentator adds the hope of our savior and brother Jesus, noting that the reshaping of the vessel can lead not to disaster, but to resurrection.

Which brings us to our gospel today. Again, not an easy or gentle passage but crucial in our honest walk with our God as SMWC and Trinity.

I invite you now to open your bulletins again to the gospel and follow along as I read the text as interpreted by the scholar Eugene Peterson in The Message version of this text.

Figure the Cost

²⁵⁻²⁷ One day when large groups of people were walking along with him, Jesus turned and told them, “Anyone who comes to me but refuses to let go of father, mother, spouse, children, brothers, sisters—yes, even one’s own self!—can’t be my disciple. Anyone who won’t shoulder his own cross and follow behind me can’t be my disciple.

²⁸⁻³⁰ “Is there anyone here who, planning to build a new house, doesn’t first sit down and figure the cost so you’ll know if you can complete it? If you only get the foundation laid and then run out of money, you’re going to look pretty foolish. Everyone passing by will poke fun at you: ‘He started something he couldn’t finish.’

³¹⁻³² “Or can you imagine a king going into battle against another king without first deciding whether it is possible with his ten thousand troops to face the twenty thousand troops of the other? And if he decides he can’t, won’t he send an emissary and work out a truce?

³³ “Simply put, if you’re not willing to take what is dearest to you, whether plans or people, and kiss it good-bye, you can’t be my disciple. (Luke 14: 25-33, The Message)

Our savior and brother Jesus walks with us, yes brings resurrection into our lives, and too, requires that we count the cost of following him, as individuals, as churches, and as the church.

Jesus tells us plainly that following him will cost us, and we must figure the

cost before we embark on our journey with him.

Emilie Townes a theologian and professor at Yale Divinity School enumerates what we must give up; we tend to think of our things, and yes, we cannot cling to those, but far more important to let go:

“In the process of becoming living disciples, we must, as Jesus states, also learn to give up all of our possessions—our need to acquire, our yearning for success, our petty jealousies, our denigrating stereotypes of others, our prejudices and hatreds, and more—and follow the way of Jesus, as we place ourselves on the ever-treading potter’s wheel to examine our thoughts, words, and actions.” (Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4, page 46)

None of us know where we are headed in our journey as Trinity and SMWC. All I know is that God is working on us, the potter is shaping and reshaping the clay, calling us, inviting us to new ways perhaps far beyond what we can imagine or pray for.

The writer Annie Lamott writes of understanding God’s path for us as like driving a car on a dark country road. We can only see as far ahead as the headlights can shine in the darkness.

And that is all, and that is enough for us to keep going forward, trusting in the potter to keep us on the wheel.

Amen.