

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from September 9, 2007

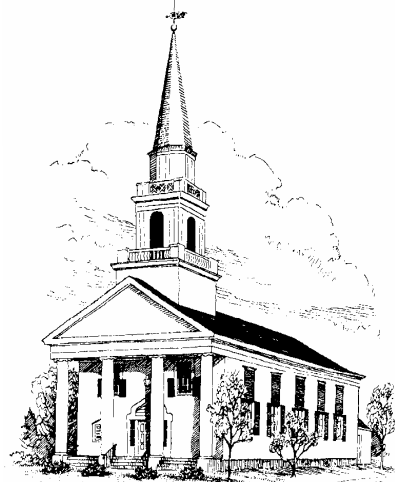
Rev. Barbara J. Libby

“Reworking the Clay”

Scriptures:

Psalm 1

Jeremiah 18:1-11



In our reading from the prophecy of Jeremiah today, we watch as Jeremiah goes to a potter’s workshop to observe the work of a potter. And what did Jeremiah see? He watched as the potter struggled with one clay vessel which did not go as the potter had hoped. Jeremiah then watched as the potter recognized that that clay pot was “spoiled” and he reworked the clay into something else, something new, “as seemed good” to the potter, as the text tells us.

There is a significant point of hope here in this reading that we need to be sure to note. The prophet notices that the potter can re-work the clay if it seems to go badly and the potter is not limited by the original design or the original piece that had been planned, but instead the potter can rework the clay into something new. The potter can always begin over; the potter can start again and rework the clay until something better emerges.

I’ve worked with clay through the years. I’ve struggled with learning to “throw” a pot on a wheel—not an easy and often quite a messy operation! When one works with wet clay on a wheel, centrifugal force has a tendency to make the clay fly off in many directions when that wheel turns. Not only do I remember how messy I got when I worked on the wheel, I also remember how forgiving the clay was as I worked with it—reforming the clay over and over again. I remember that wonderful thing about clay and how adaptable and forgiving it was, even in the hands of a rank amateur.

Good clay never has to be thrown out. Clay is always reusable. Clay is always able to be remade into something good, even if the first couple of tries are a complete disaster. As long as the clay remains moist and pliable, clay can be remade into something good. However, if clay gets hardened, then it cannot be reformed.

In this prophetic moment, Jeremiah perceives that the potter functions in the same capacity as God does. Jeremiah perceives that we humans are the clay in God’s hands. Just like a potter at a wheel, no matter how badly bent out of shape the clay gets, it can be reworked and the air bubbles removed until something useable, serviceable, or even beautiful emerges. Just like a human potter, God must use strong but gentle hands on the clay to help it be molded into something good. As every human potter knows, it takes very gentle but also very firm pressure on the clay to get it to cooperate.

Jeremiah observes a dynamic relationship in the potter’s workshop. Both the potter and the clay have to work together to end up with a good product. Each party affects the other by its decisions and plans. The outcome of this relationship is not fixed by just one party or the other—it is a joint effort! The potter must be willing and able to make the clay change and the clay has to cooperate with the pot-

ter to be ready to be changed for the better. God works with tender loving care to help mold us into the way that God wants us to go. Yet God also allows us to make mistakes.

Jeremiah, later in his writing, reveals that Israel did not always respond well to God's molding and, as a result, suffered serious consequences. God may have wanted Israel to be more cooperative and to return to being obedient to God's design. Yet the relationship between Israel and God continued to be a lively and life-filled one in which there was always the possibility of repentance and of change on both sides.

Jeremiah saw a potter at a potter's wheel and God invited the prophet to learn about how God works. Like Jeremiah, we, too, can learn that God gives us more chances to change and to get it right. Like the potter at the wheel, when God recognizes that the work in his hands has gone wrong, God does not throw out the clay; rather, God gives it a new start and makes something useful and beautiful out of the redeemed lump.

The good news is that God can always choose to turn and start again with us. Now that's good news! We are never garbage in God's eyes. As long as we remain pliable and willing, we are never useless or thrown away. We are always recyclable.

God also works with us and speaks with us in the context of the everyday and the ordinary. God approached Jeremiah at a potter's workshop. God is present with us in all parts of our lives, not only in worship but in all we do—our work and our play time. God is always at work redeeming and reforming us. One commentator suggests, "Judgment is not about harming us because we are bad, but about reforming us to be better." (Online resource: *Worship Planning Helps* © 2007, The General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church)

Jeremiah watched the potter who worked with the clay and saw that working with clay requires patience and persistence. God, like the potter, is always willing to rework us, to remake us into something new, to correct the flaws and to make us better. God continues to care for us, even when we err, sin, or make mistakes.

Here we are on this 9th day of September, 2007, at the very start of a new program year—our *Rally Day*, our returning day—a re-gathering day when we begin again. I hear both our Psalm and our prophetic readings pointing us to invite God into our lives, to help us stay connected with God, so that God can help nourish us and reshape us into something new.

Who knows what new direction God might have in store for us? Who knows how malleable we may have to be as we face into a new season if God is indeed the one in charge, the potter ready to mold us in new ways? Who knows what profound change or transformation God may have in mind for each of us and for this church as it moves into the future? Will Mystic Congregational Church allow God to reshape this place? Will we invite God in with open hearts and trust that God has a plan? Are we willing and ready to be clay in God's hands even if we can't see the finished product right now?

If we truly are ready for being transformed by the Great Potter, we may need to prepare ourselves for some pretty significant changes that might ask us to move in new ways. This potter God we follow may decide that, in spite of all manner of change and difficulty that this congregation has faced in the last 12 months, with God's help and with God at the potter's wheel, some pretty amazing things might just happen here.

Like Jeremiah's experience in the potter's workshop, we may need to trust that God will have to

rework the clay that we are, into a big huge lump before something new can emerge. Perhaps this church has to really hit bottom before we admit that we cannot do anything without God's help.

In the course of my short 5-month tenure here at Mystic Congregational Church, I have heard some folks wonder in many different ways about this church. Some have asked, "What is wrong with this church?" Others have asked, "What happens that we have so many pastors come and go here?" Others have wondered, "Why can't we find a pastor who will guarantee us that they'll stay?" Still others have looked outside of this congregation and blamed "those people out there", "those people in Hartford", "those UCC folks". It's always easy to blame others for the situation we're in. It's much more challenging to consider our part in the process.

What if we begin with the assumption that God is really at work here reshaping this church? What does it mean if God is at work here remolding this church into a different and even better church? What does it mean for us if God is an active participant in helping make this clay we call Mystic Congregational Church into a new vessel? What does it mean for each of us if our work is to listen and discern what God calls us to do? Do you think this church is ready and willing to change? Yet?

Today we begin a new church program year with patience, persistence and trust that all will be well. In the coming weeks, we will be doing a number of important things. The Nominating Committee will be gathering willing folks to serve on the pastoral search committee. The church will be examining and learning more about our relationship to the denomination that this church has been affiliated with since the mid-60's. We will be putting together a budget for the new fiscal year 2008. We will begin a stewardship campaign to support that budget with its theme *Moving Ahead Together into the Future*.

We need a renewed commitment to this church family from everyone! We need to refocus on both the present and the future of this church as it moves ahead. It's possible we need to consider new ways we think about this church's budget and the way this church spends its money. We may need to adjust our thinking and move from a "scarcity model" that says fearfully "We don't have enough!" to an "abundance model", a model that declares faithfully that "God will provide all that we need".

If we really believe that everything we have is God's and if we also believe that God made all of this that we have as a gift for us, then:

Let's reconsider what it means if we are God's stewards.

Let's reconsider what it means if we are managers of God's wealth.

Let's reconsider what God wants us to really be doing here at Mystic Congregational Church.

If we have been entrusted by God with everything we have, then nothing we "have" is truly ours alone. Instead of worrying about whether we have "enough money" to do this or that here at Mystic Congregational Church, let's trust that God will provide and has already provided—we may just need to share it!

What God needs us to do is to dream really big about what we might do in this coming budget year. As we envision the new budgets for each of our committees across the church in this month of September, let's consider dreaming big. Let's dream about what this church might be able to do if we had unlimited funds.

Let's dream about what we could do here at Mystic Congregational Church if we had enough money for a Director of Youth so that our ministry to youth might grow and flourish. Let's dream about what we might do if we had another pastor on board so that our Parish Care could expand and all our homebound elders might receive regular visits by a pastor. Let's dream about what we might do if we had a person who could reach out into the wider community to provide care and counseling for those

who are overwhelmed by poverty, joblessness or lack of adequate food and shelter.

Is it just possible that the Master Potter has in mind something so big, that we haven't even imagined it yet? Jeremiah challenges us here in Mystic this day. Let's refocus and believe that God is the Master Potter for this congregation. Let's consider what God might be inviting this church to change as it moves into the future. Let's wonder what God has in store for this congregation as it moves into the future.

Is this church made of supple clay? Is this congregation able and willing to be reshaped into something new? Do we trust that God is reworking the clay? Let us go out this day together to find out! Amen.