

Sermon for Sept. 8, 2019  
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church  
Jer. 11: 1-10; Ps. 139  
Rev. Rosemary McMahan

*Lord God, by the power of your Spirit, give us strength to believe and live out the message we hear this day, through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

### Potter and Poet

“How weighty are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—and I am still with you.” Those words from Ps 139 are how I feel about our two scriptures today, scriptures that proclaim the amazing and inconceivable love that God the Creator has for each and every one of us, no matter what.

Do any of you remember the bumper sticker from the 1980’s that proclaimed, “God don’t make no junk”? I understand its sentiment to be that we are children of God, not junk, but that double negative suggests otherwise. God don’t make no junk actually says God does make junk. Our pastor at that time used that quotation as the basis for his sermon one Sunday, agreeing that God indeed makes junk all the time, and we, in our sinfulness and brokenness, are that junk. He went on to say that it is only through the grace of God that we become something more valuable than junk.

I’ve thought about that sermon from time to time, and while I get the point of the bumper sticker theology for building self-esteem and the point of our pastor reminding us of our reliance on grace, I think we children of God can be found somewhere in between. Our actions and attitudes, choices and behaviors at times certainly can be junk. And, our reliance on the grace of God is a definite. But we ourselves are something more precious than junk, if we truly believe the loving Word of God found in our two passages today.

Let’s look first at the potter in Jeremiah. Has anyone ever dabbled in making pottery? I have not, but it’s obviously a very messy and painstaking process. As the metaphor suggests, we are the clay pots in God’s hands. If we are in fact made in God’s image, then *God* does not make junk. Instead, God sits at the potter’s wheel with each one of us in hand while clay is slung on his face and his back begins to ache. God notices where we are marred and shapes us as it seems good to him with loving patience and infinite tenderness and wisdom. God does not make junk. Humans do.

Over the years, our clay pots weaken and crack and sometimes even break. “But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands,” we are told. Life takes it punches, doesn’t it? The innocence of childhood and the security of knowing we are unconditionally loved quickly give way when the pot gets dropped or banged around or

mishandled and becomes marred. Oftentimes, those cracks and fissures are caused by the harsh words, the unfair judgments, and unkind actions of others, and oftentimes, those cracks and fissures are caused simply by our own sinful and selfish choices. If we are not messy and chipped pots right now, we no doubt have been so in the past.

I wonder how many of us look in the mirror with self-recrimination because we either didn't hear in our own families of origin about how valued and loved we are, just because we are, or we don't hear it from our spouses or friends, or we didn't hear it from that string of pastors who talked about hell and judgment day when we were growing up, or we don't hear it today from this institution we call "the Church," or even from the members within our churches. *What a tragedy that is, not to know we are loved just because.* I wonder how many of us still wear labels titled unlovable, unlikeable, failure, not worthy, ugly, unpopular, stupid, dense, mistake, and disappointment, among others, and still *believe* them. It is those false labels, those dints, those hurts that God the Potter wants to smooth away, remold, and make right. But it isn't easy work for God, or for us.

I know from talking to real potters that repairing a broken piece of pottery is anything but fun. Creating or repairing a broken vessel takes an immense amount of time, attention, skill, and love. When God offered to re-shape the pot of Israel, he was making a love-offering, something that cost him. And that is good news because, as we may never have been told, we don't have to be perfect to be loved. In fact, the Potter doesn't even expect us to be perfect. Instead, he expects to "shape us" as seems good to him, to shape us into people who know they are beloved because they are being held in the very hands of God. But there is a catch. We are not, in fact, clay, which is passive and mindless. God says that when Israel repents, then God can reshape it. It takes a response on the part of the pot, too. If we are willing and receptive to the Potter, then the Potter can reshape and repurpose us, and even use our faults and fissures for something good. Our old wounds and chips can be smoothed away and turned into compassion and empathy and forgiveness. What makes us brittle—like anger and bitterness--can be molded into something precious and useful *if* we allow God to lay his hands on us, just as Christ laid hands on those who were ill. We can say "Yes," to the Potter, or we can say, as Israel chose to do, "It's no use. We will continue with our own plans; each of us will follow the stubbornness of his evil heart," as Jeremiah writes in verse 12. We may say our words of confession and claim we want to change, but that means we have to let go of our own will, agendas, and pride, and sometimes we, like Israel, simply refuse.

Let's now turn to the poet. Ps. 139 is attributed to David, that same David who committed adultery, stole another man's wife, and arranged to have her husband killed in battle, that same David whose family can go down in Biblical history as the most dysfunctional in all of scripture, that root of Jesse from which Jesus Christ himself descended. Yet the power of God's love was able to seep into David's cracked armor of self-loathing, bitterness, and self-sufficiency so that David could acknowledge, *without* fear, "O Lord, you have searched me and you know me" (1).

One of the Hebrew meanings of the verb “to know” is “to possess.” God possesses the whole package of our selves, all of it—our faults, failings, and gold stars. God knows us intimately, our going out and our lying down, and is “familiar with all our ways” (3). Indeed, God “is watching us,” as the poet proclaims with assurance. But consider how warped that truth, that incredibly good news—that God is watching us--has become over the years! God is not the author of the billboards that proclaim, “I See You Down There—God,” or “You Think THIS Is Hot?—God,” or my longtime favorite that can be found on I-65 on the way to the beach: “Go to church or the devil will get you.” Always beware of bumper sticker and billboard theology, those messages that try to control the children of God through fear, for there is no fear of God in Ps. 139, only awe, and amazement, and honor, and love: “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb,” by love and in love, made by an attentive and caring Potter.

Our history and our hurts and the false messages we’ve received are so hard to let loose. I’m reminded of something my daughter used to say to me when I would be down on myself: “Don’t feed the monster, Mom.” Four simple, profound, words: Don’t Feed the Monster. The monster is that part of us that says, “Boy, are you stupid. Why did you think you could do that? Don’t you know you aren’t good enough? Give it up. You’ll never make any difference,” and our reply is, “You’re right. I’ll never be good enough.” Those thoughts are NOT from God because when we cut ourselves down, we are, in fact, saying, “Heh, God, you goofed up in creating me.” That’s pretty brazen, isn’t it? But we ARE good enough because GOD made us for no other reason than love. We can claim with the psalmist:

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful,  
I know that full well. (14)

Do we know that *full well*? Do we believe that, *full well*? Do we tell our loved ones that they, too, are wonderfully made for love? Are we going to believe a billboard, a guilt-inducing preacher, a broken parent, a weak spouse, a bitter friend, old records, or God?

God continues to shape us into his image, to smooth out the sins, and straighten out the bad habits, and rub out the fears, and make us into strong and healthy and joyful creations, if we let him. Allowing him to work on us is the way we express our love to him in return. But the first, the very first, thing we have to be doing before we can do anything else is this: love ourselves because God first loved us. And God does not make junk.

Thanks be to God.