

September 8, 2019 | Sanctuary worship service

TEXT: [Jeremiah 18:1-11](#)

TITLE: God's Artistic Side

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

This weekend is the art fair in Mellon Park. Invariably art fairs have several booths of potters showing their wares: mugs, vases, and bowls. On display are only the finished products. What we don't see are the times when the shape wasn't quite right, when the clay wasn't centered properly on the spinning wheel, when the potter had to collapse the damp clay and start over. It's an amazing, creative process built around three things: clay—movement—and pressure; material, motion, and the guiding, gentle hand of the potter. Not unlike life itself.

Clay is an amazing substance. The qualities that make clay so unproductive to a gardener are what make it so desirable to a potter. You can work clay, molding it into a simple doll or a beautiful Ming vase. In the book of Genesis, our very existence is described through the analogy of God molding human beings out of the clay of the ground. And it's a good analogy. In many ways, you and I are clay; for humanity as a whole, we are all clay. We are malleable, changeable, and each capable of great art and beauty.

Think about how much you've changed from the early years of your life until today. You're still the same person—the same basic clay—but you've changed. Maybe you're a rounder vase than you were in high school. Assuredly you're wiser now than you were then. The same is true of the world around us. The clay of humanity has a different shape now than it had 30 or 50 years ago. Not so long ago people worried about polio, about needing iron-lung machines to survive, about dying from infections or kidney failure in the days before dialysis. We take for granted technology that science fiction writers couldn't have imagined a century ago. We are clay and to clay we shall return; yet ever malleable, changing, the same material in different forms from day to day.

Now, it's true that we are like moldable clay, but only if we keep moving. Let clay sit for long, leave it out to dry in the sun and it becomes fixed, rigid, unyielding. Ask yourself: What keeps me in motion? When I wake up in the morning, what am I moving toward? Am I simply getting through the day, putting one foot in front of the other—or am I walking with purpose somewhere?

Potters start their wheels turning and then they plop the clay in the center. They use motion to coax the clay to rise up, to become much more than a ball of clay, but instead become a beautiful vase or sculpture. In the same way, to be alive is to be in motion. How you spend your days is ultimately how you spend your life. Much of our daily motion is mundane—eating meals, doing work, brushing teeth, doing laundry. But in moving to care for a child, navigate a marriage, negotiate aches and pains or perhaps a serious disease, in that way our clay is formed into a living being. Through motion and repetition our personal work of art takes shape.

Vincent Van Gogh began painting when he was 27 and died when he was 37, producing some of his best work in the last two years of his life. In one of his letters, he challenged the idea that someone is born a painter. He argued that while the ability to paint may be within us, you can't simply wait for this talent to emerge. It is something you have to reach out and intentionally grasp. He said, "Practice makes perfect; it is by painting one becomes a painter."

Movement matters. Aiming for goals—working for goals—matters. It's what transforms us from a lump of clay into a work of art. But that can sound too much like a demanding self-help strategy: Just work harder! So I also want to offer a word of grace. The creative process has never been a straight line. One art professor at Stanford tells his students to leave twice as much time as you think you need for a project because creativity is unpredictable. Half of what you're doing may not look like you're being productive, but it is all part of the larger creative process. Serendipity and inspiration can't be forced.

A potter sets the wheel in motion and plops a mound of clay in the center. At some point in the molding process, the piece begins to take shape. It is on its way to becoming a vase or a bowl. So think back to your life: What parts of your story have shaped you into the person you are now? Have you ever had to start over, backtrack, squash down some work you had done and begin again with a fresh start? Almost no potter gets from raw clay to finished artwork in one attempt. They start and stop; they begin, then mash down the clay and begin again. In the same way, you move in one direction and then have to backtrack. You re-think your route, your priorities. You react to adversity. You take a deep breath; you pick up the pieces and start again. Such is the nature of all life.

I said earlier that the creative process is built around three things, of which we've talked about the first two: clay and movement. The faith process also involves the same things. We are clay—individually and collectively part of God's plan, creatures of artistic possibilities. As living beings, we are always in motion. We move through our individual lives, putting one foot in front of the other, building connections to others, working towards goals so that our life has meaning. Collectively we are also in motion. We choose how to define what it means to live as the human race. Do we seek justice or hoard profits? Pursue long-term well-being or short-term gratification? Every movement forward invariably has stops and starts. We fought a Civil War to end slavery, yet we replaced the old laws of racial bondage with new laws of segregation, Jim Crow, and systems of criminal injustice—so there remains work to be done. We grow in our awareness of the common humanity that unites us in all our diversity of gender and sexual identities, yet we hesitate to embrace this truth in workplaces that still have pay inequity between men and women, discrimination based on sexual orientation and identity, and barriers to full citizenship vindictively based on country of origin and native languages. That is why as people of faith, we must keep moving. We are to keep acting now, praying now, yearning now for the already-but-not-yet horizon of God's realm of justice and love.

Which leads me to the third part of this pottery equation: clay, movement, and pressure. When Jeremiah introduced his analogy of God as the divine potter and we being the clay in God's hands, he was making two points: God is the one in charge and the land of Judah, the clay in God's hands, was heading in the wrong direction. It was becoming an unsightly work of art. Specifically, the previous king of Judah, Josiah, had started the country on a path of righteousness—following the laws the Moses and rejecting the ways of idolatry by faithfully worshiping God alone. But the current king, Jehoiakim, had strayed from this path. And the approaching Babylonian army was proof that their nation was doomed and the Judean clay would be crushed down and re-worked by God.

As grim as that may sound, there is a word of hope built into this prophetic word. When potters mold clay, they use a steady, gentle pressure. In the same way, God's hands are ever upon us. This is the artistic side of God's nature. It involves a dance between divine providence and human free will—between the shaper of clay and the clay being shaped. Gentle pressure moves the clay up from a blob to a work of art, from irrational creatures to beings just a little lower than angels. Yes, we can push back against this pressure. We can bend and warp ourselves in ways contrary to God's plan. Or we can accept the guidance of God's hands, do what is righteous, and become more than we imagined possible, both individually and as a human race.

God's artistic pressure on us is meant to evoke that which leads to abundant life, justice, beauty and peace. That's why there's the famous verse in Jeremiah 29 where God says, "*The plans I have for you are for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.*" God creatively reacts to our needs and seeks to bring out our potential. That's why in Jeremiah 18, God surprising admits, "*I will change my mind about the disaster I intended to bring.*" God may be eternal, knowledgeable of all time and all events, but that doesn't make God immutable, locked into specific behavior regardless of our choices or needs in the moment. God's pressure is a gentle, shaping embrace—responsive to where we are and always, always seeking what is best for us and all people. So the three qualities of pottery work are also true of faith work: clay—movement—pressure.

The artistic side of God was best revealed in Christ who took the clay of this broken mortal life and produced the amazing artwork of resurrection hope. Allow the gentle pressure of God to work on you and work with you; trust Christ to guide you and evoke from you that which is life-giving to all and beautiful to behold.

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