

A Communion Meditation on Throwing Pots

Readings: Jeremiah 18:1-6 and 2 Corinthians 4:7-10

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In the 1920s a missionary conference was held in British East Africa—a conference which drew a great number of missionaries from a number of different denominations. As they discussed their common tasks, a common spirit developed among them, and it seemed only natural as they concluded their meetings to celebrate the Lord's Supper. They held their service of Holy Communion in a Scottish Church at which an Anglican Bishop presided. Those present were deeply moved as the Spirit blew its unifying breeze among them, and as they shared in ecumenical worship at the Lord's Table they were deeply nourished.

Word of this liturgical and trans-denominational innovation got out, however, and the Bishop of Zanzibar brought a formal protest against such intercommunion to the Archbishop of Canterbury, who in turn called a consultative council composed of eminent Anglican Divines. They struggled with the various liturgical, ecclesiastical, and theological issues involved, and finally made their recommendation, which one of the bishops -- (George Bell, Bishop of Chichester) summarized as follows: "The Commission comes to the conclusion that the Service at Kikuyu was eminently pleasing to God and must on no account be repeated."—(told by Henry Sloane Coffin, in "The Public Worship of God")

The Lord's Table draws Christians together, often in spite of themselves. Our faith not only draws us together, it shapes us. It shapes us as a community of faith, allowing us to transcend barriers that divide us, and it shapes us as individuals, moulding us ever more into the image of Christ.

The formative power of faith became vivid for Jeremiah one day on a visit to a potter's house. There he saw the potter working at his wheel, and as the potter worked his wheel Jeremiah recalls, "The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. Then the word of the Lord came to me: 'Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? ... Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.'"—(Jeremiah 18:4-6)

Few of us are potters, but the image of "throwing a pot" is not that difficult a metaphor to grasp. It's a powerful image of formation. What starts as a mound of sloppy, wet clay, spinning in a wobbly and clumsy manner on a potter's wheel becomes in the end a graceful form, spinning gracefully on the wheel as the potter works its height and form into something that eventually becomes a beautiful vessel—much like these Ten Thousand Villages pots strewn about up here.

Today is also All Saints Day, an occasion to recognize and give thanks for the myriad of voices that have shaped the life and faith of the Church—the voices of Saint Francis, Saint Augustine, and Saint Agnes, to name just a few; the voices of Thomas Aquinas, Michael Sattler, Feliz Manz, Thomas Merton, Mother Teresa, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Oscar Romero, to name a few more.

Saints do not start out with full-blown saintliness. Much like everyone else, they start as a mound of sloppy, wet clay, spinning in a wobbly and clumsy manner on God's potter's wheel, but, having proved sufficiently pliant to yield to God's hand, they were shaped by God's gentle yet firm hand, and became extraordinary vessels of God's grace. No doubt saints would be the first to admit, like Saint Paul, that their human vessel was most delicate and fragile.

I am told that before clay can be used to "throw a pot" it must be wedged, which, apparently, is similar to kneading bread dough. It's done to remove air bubbles and to provide a smooth consistency. In other words, the clay must be worked until it is supple enough to be shaped on the wheel. And after the clay is properly wedged it must be centred—a very important step in throwing a pot, for if the clay is not centred properly on the wheel the pot becomes distorted and may be ruined.

The potter that Jeremiah observed, however, was quite willing to rework the clay if it proved to lack pliancy or centred-ness. Similarly, the voices of faith from the past that we remember as saints are memorable because they proved willing to be worked and reworked and reshaped, until they were filled with the grace of God. As Saint Paul wrote, "...we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us."—(2 Corinthians 4:7) The saints submitted themselves to God so that "...the life of Jesus may...be made visible..."—(2 Corinthians 4:10)

No where is the reworking ability of the Master Potter more apparent than in the lives of biblical saints, who are sufficiently removed from us in time that their saintliness is more liable to remain intact. I doubt it would have taken us very long, however, had we lived in their day to recognize that they all had clay feet. Solomon had a reputation for wisdom but failed to practice what he preached. Elijah proved to be inconsistent, and folded under pressure. Ruth slept around. Hosea's family life was in shambles. King David might have qualified as head of state now-a-days, but his moral character was dubious at best. Jeremiah was too emotional, and far too alarmist to be of great use to any community. Peter had a bad temper, and a shaky loyalty. And Paul lacked tact!

Earthen vessels though we all be, it is into just such vessels that God chose to place the gospel of grace, peace, love, mercy and redemption. Thank God that the One who is far more skilled in life than we are wants to take us and mould us into vessels of grace and love. It is with gratitude that we come to the Lord's Table—a table where all who are willing to submit to the spirit of Christ are welcome—those who have much faith and those who have little; those who come often, and those who come seldom; all who have tried to follow, and all who have failed, but having failed, were willing to try again.

The Lord's Supper, in our tradition, is a community ordinance. It has to do with peace and unity among us; it has to do with harmonious relationships; it has to do with commitment, not only to Christ, but to our sisters and brothers within this fellowship. I treasure that approach, and the tradition that sustains it. Perhaps just once, however, like the 1920s missionary conference held in British East Africa, we could break tradition—perhaps combine a few traditions—and, as long as we promise not to repeat it, approach the Lord's Table in another way, in a very personal and individual way.

Let us partake of the Lord's Table, not so much with a mind as to who is worthy to partake and who is not worthy, but with a disciplined look at our own worthiness, for this is not my table; it is the Lord's table. It is not for me to say who can sit where and who can not. Christ is our host.

This is not my food on this sacred table. I did not prepare it; you did not prepare it. It is not your blood; it is not my body. It is the blood and body of Christ. It is not for us to tell him, the one who often sat at table with sinners, who is worthy to partake of it and who is not. —(adapted from a communion invitation written by Bass Mitchell, a United Methodist minister in Virginia)

That God takes a personal interest in the formation of each one of us is apparent in our earlier reading from the Psalms—Psalm 139:

"Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.

...it was You who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works...." —(Psalm 139: 1-2, 4, 13-14) It may be difficult to believe, given our ailments of one sort and another—be it bodies that defy gracefulness or hearts that have to be jump-started—that we are "wonderfully made". Even more disturbing is when a situation brings into focus our spiritual flaws and weaknesses. With the psalmist, however, we can rejoice that we are being wonderfully made. We rejoice that God, insofar as we prove spiritually pliable, continues to work on us, working at the flaws, reworking weak spots, His firm but forgiving hands kneading and shaping in order that each one of us might become what the Master Potter wants us to be.