



Old Habits

TEXT
Psalm 139:1-12
Jeremiah 18:1-12

September 4, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Zach Walker

Has life ever felt, at times, to be like a project that has been spoiled?

Maybe it is because you are struggling to forgive, or be forgiven by, family. Maybe there are decisions you swear you won't make again, yet time and again you give in. Maybe you just aren't where you think you should be in life — that life, somewhere along the way, took a turn that you haven't recovered from.

Today's passage speaks about being in God's hands in such times.

But the question — both fair and difficult — is how? How, in such painful and upsetting moments, could I possibly be in God's hands? If I am in God's hands, then why am I going through this terrible ordeal in the first place?

We often hear this confusion in surface sentiments: People talk of being "blessed" as though those who lack, or those who aren't so well "blessed," lack God's presence.

So what does it mean to be in God's hands?

I'll tell you right from the start where I'm going today: Not only are we in God's hands, but God's hands are good, capable, and they are at work in our lives right now.

Jeremiah was a prophet who lived in the seventh century

before Jesus and, in our verses today, spoke during a time before Israel was scattered into disarray and exiled from their own home. It is important to note prophets speak not, as we so often think, of the future, so much as they speak of and about the present.

At some point Jeremiah, where he was living, went down and found himself looking into a potter's house. He watched the potter at work. He saw what was being fashioned was a kind of pot or vessel, and there, as he watched, the vessel was suddenly wrecked. Something went wrong, and it collapsed in on itself — the word the Scripture uses is that the vessel was "spoiled."

But just as that happens, Jeremiah sees that the potter does not stop working with the clay, and the potter does not throw the clay out. Instead, the potter reworks the clay into another vessel, and this vessel, in the words of Scripture, "seems good to him."

As Jeremiah watches this, he feels the voice of God telling him that this potter represented the present; what he begins to see is that this image before him is like the relationship between God and Israel.

When Jeremiah was living, the reality for Israel was that they —

they who were called by God to be a blessing and to do something great in the world — were living like spoiled children. The government had become corrupt; they were shirking their responsibility to the stranger; they did not extend hospitality to family; they used their excess to their own benefit rather than to others; the justice system was slanted toward those who had influence and worked against those who had no voice.

Israel had, in the image of Jeremiah, become like a spoiled lump of clay. Just like the spoiled clay is still in the potter's hands, being in the potter's hands did not prevent the clay from being spoiled.

In Jeremiah, there is the suggestion that human actions may not be entirely predictable by God. The clay can suddenly work against the potter's intentions. But the potter is responsive. If the clay changes, the potter will change!

For Jeremiah, God warns Israel: Change what is going on or you will surely head for disaster! I cannot abide the direction you are going, so alter your path so that I might alter my judgment!

The imagery suggests that creation is not static, that God's hand is continually at work. But — and this is significant — it also lays *responsibility* at the feet of human action and human

decisions, *not* due to an inactive or indifferent God.

There is a sense in which God signals us to stop doing something, or to turn away from what we are doing — in the Bible the word used for that is to *repent* — and that *depending on what we do*, God responds.

In effect, our decisions matter; and as a result, we have to grapple with our potential, and in some ways our tendency to collapse in on ourselves. In short, we have habits that are not healthy for us.

Charles Duhigg, in his book *The Power of Habit*, writes about the way habits are both good and bad for us. Some habits allow us to think about other things while we perform complex tasks, like driving a car. Those are helpful.

But some habits are what cause us to snack when we are bored or lonely. Other habits are what trigger us to get angry whenever that one topic or memory comes up.

Meredith and I have been married now for one year, five months and 29 days. But that is long enough to be deep in the weeds of arguments that come up again and again — those words or phrases or issues that come up enough times for us to not actually have a new discussion so much as act out the habit, or the routine, of the discussion.

I'll give you an example: During an argument, Meredith will sometimes say, "Do you think I'm stupid?"

Just saying that phrase here with you increases my blood pressure. I'm not sure there's a good way to answer that question. I've tried "no." I've tried "nnnn-nooooo!" I've tried, "Hey, what's

that over there?" God help me, I've even tried "yes." No matter what the case, we've learned that the phrase itself is a cue for both of us that makes an unhealthy routine.

So the only way we know how to break that habit, to break that routine, is to outlaw the phrase in our arguments. Our best solution is to stop doing the thing that creates an unhealthy pattern.

What Jeremiah sees around him is God warning the people of Israel: "Stop doing these things that are unhealthy for you! Allow me to shape you before it is too late!"

But Israel's response seems to indicate a lack of trust or faith that God can truly reshape them; or maybe they feel they are unable or incapable of being changed. And so, rather than submit to the reshaping process, they stay set in their brokenness.

Israel's response to God's urging is basically saying, "We want to do that, but we *know* we won't. We have our schemes; we have our ways; we have our habits. How are we to do anything different in the face of such patterns?"

It's like they have resigned themselves to who they are, and they don't seem to believe that change is actually possible.

In his book on habits, Duhigg notes a peculiar factor that makes an enormous difference when trying to change an old habit and create a new one: You have to believe it will work; you have to believe it is possible.

Belief matters. The first step on the road to change is the belief that the road exists and that it goes somewhere.

So I don't mean to say, "Just don't worry, even if life feels like

a mess; just trust in God more and believe more." Has someone ever told you that in light of something difficult, or when life feels like it is cracking? Not too helpful, is it?

It's a nice thought, but the image of the clay and the potter does not end with the clay collapsing, nor does it end with the clay believing more. It ends with more work. God is not finished with it, and God is not finished with us. It is God's intention to work each and every one of us into something new.

Something I learn over and over again about God is that God is never finished.

There are two things I want to take away from this image of God reworking the clay:

First, reworking the clay is a process that takes time. And second, it is not entirely pleasant for the clay.

If you have ever seen what a potter has to do to rework the clay after it collapses, it isn't fun. You have to pound it, get the air out, and the whole time, the wheel spins around and around, and I have to imagine the clay feels like it is going in circles and getting nowhere.

Being reworked or refashioned takes time. Old habits aren't undone easily. Research reveals that old habits don't die; they have to be replaced. In order to do and be something new, we have to layer it over what is old. Learning something new, developing a new habit to replace the old one, takes time and patience.

But if we trust in what is happening, the result is that we become what the potter wants us to be. The clay is shaped in a way that seems good to the potter. We become shaped, not necessarily

into what we have always wanted to be, but rather we become what God has always wanted us to be. And if I had to choose between what I would fashion myself into and what God would fashion me into, I would take God any day.

But that decision to be shaped is a vulnerable moment. It requires courage and compassion and connection. That's why, in the words of Brené Brown, it is a process.

Brown writes about what it takes to shape one's life into what she calls a "wholehearted" life and narrows it down to three components: courage, compassion and connection. The problem is that these elements are not something you can achieve or just check off of a list; they are lifelong processes. And that means we need to practice them over and over again, never really feeling like we have perfected them.

And because we won't feel like we have perfected them, we can feel ashamed that we aren't who we wish we were, or ashamed that we struggle with things, or that we aren't better at or more fulfilled in life.

Those feelings can become a habit, and the temptation is to fold in on ourselves and remain a spoiled lump of clay, not believing we can be any different.

Instead, Brown encourages us to own our story of imperfection rather than constantly deny it. She writes, "Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy — the experiences that

make us the most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light."¹

While I want to tell you that you will one day feel like you have arrived, that you have achieved the exact shape God wants you to be, the truth is we are always susceptible to treating love like something we have achieved or mastered rather than as action — or habit — that needs to be consistently practiced.

We are always being remade in God's hands. Fortunately, re-creating is one of God's habits.

Yes, change is difficult. Clay work is messy. You get your hands dirty. It's wet. It takes patience and practice. When you work the wheel, you end up getting some of your creation on you. And that might just be the point. Working clay is often described as a relationship between the potter and the clay. And in this passage, we should note the clay never becomes anything other than what the potter, the master, intends.

So where in your own story has God used events to reshape you?

Or maybe you are still in the midst of collapsing, and your prayer is to be patient with time and to endure the messy and sometimes difficult reshaping. If that is the case, I suggest praying that prayer to God. Believe it or not, God can handle prayers of frustration.

And in addition to that prayer, tell someone. Risk being a little vulnerable by owning your story and your struggle, rather than hiding it from others.

Next week we begin a new sermon series that looks at different

aspects of community. I have not talked much about how we become new or remade in community or through others. We are going to spend several weeks talking about it because one of the central ways God reshapes us is in, with and through community.

Our hope in doing so is that you consider the ways we interact, or fail to interact, with our communities. Our hope is that we would incorporate some new practices into our lives — that we would cultivate some new habits as we recognize God's hands at work in our lives through those around us. But as we do so, we remember it might take work and time, and sometimes it might feel like we are spinning around and getting nowhere.

But know that it is God's desire to fashion you into something beautiful, and that seems good to God.

¹Brown, Brené. *The Gifts of Imperfection* (2010), p. 6

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.