

A Bonhoeffer Moment

Rev. Thomas Orquiza-Renardo

This morning's scriptures are kind of a mix, aren't they? From Jeremiah we have a passage that we're very familiar with and we love to hear it. It's the shaping of the clay by the potter's hands. That imagery speaks to how God works with us to change us and transform us. Then we turn to the Gospel and Jesus is talking about the cost of discipleship and hating family; mother, brother, sister, and father. Jesus says we need to give up everything we own because that's what discipleship calls for.

We're happy to hear the one... but it can be discouraging to hear the other...

I'm just gonna go with that for a little bit. I'm gonna go back to Jeremiah and I'm just gonna look at that. I like this idea of being shaped by the potter.

Well that word came to Jeremiah from the Lord, "Come down to the potter's house and there I will let you hear my words." So Jeremiah goes down to the potter's house to receive God's words and he sees a potter working with clay. A lot of times we just hear those words of how God is going to shape us. But there's something interesting in the details that we might miss in reading this passage. It's the description of the vessel in the potter's hands.

Listen to this. Jeremiah tells us, "The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled." Did you catch that detail when we read the passage earlier? "The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled."

How many here have worked with ceramics before? What's the fun thing about ceramics? You can get your hands in there and get 'em all messy and dirty as part of the creative process. You can shape your creation however you want. And if you don't like it you can start over. That's a beautiful thing about creating with clay, or painting, or drawing. Sometimes the mistakes we make in creating, can lead to something more beautiful. But you can also take those mistakes and change them. That's what God is describing is happening in the potter's hands.

I remember when I was in a ceramics class in college, there were a couple projects I had that went awry. The first project we had was to create a mask. Ok, I like this. I've never done sculpting before let's see what I can do with this. And I had a great idea that came from an inner conflict I was having. I was at the beginnings of my call to ministry at that point. It was the struggle of who I wanted to be as a minister and who I wanna be to just let loose.

The idea of the mask, the way I sculpted this expression of conflict was to make one half of the mask very human. It was what you'd normally expect when you turn to see someone's face. The face was blemish free, peaceful, open, beautiful, and pure. Then on the other side, I made it a little darker... ok, a lot darker. I gave it horns and a sharp nose, pointy ears, a cat's eye, and fangs. It was light and dark combining. I put my creation in the kiln, very proud of what I had shaped with my own hands.

Well, guess what happened to the kiln. It got way to hot. When the mask came out, I was at first disappointed with it. Because of the heat the mask was partially melted and deformed. Then I realized only the one side was melted and deformed. Can you take a guess at which side that was? It was the dark side. The human side was, for the most part, perfectly shaped. The dark side was, well, even more dark. I ultimately decided, “ok, this works.” There are times we go with the mistakes. Sometimes those mistakes lead us to wonderful things or new perceptions we had not yet imagined.

The other project was a platter. I was really into Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien at the time. If you’re familiar with Lord of the Rings you might recognize the name Gondor, or the White City of Minas Tirith. The platter I made was an aerial view of Gondor with Minas Tirith, the last stronghold and beacon of hope for humankind against the dark sorcerer Sauron, tucked into the mountain side. Once it was all sculpted and perfect, it went into the kiln.

What none of us realized was another student’s project had an air pocket in it. What happens when you put an unfired ceramic piece with an air pocket in a kiln? The air in that pocket becomes super-heated and expands. When that air expands with no place to go the pressure builds and builds until the piece explodes, sending ceramic projectiles out. If there are other projects in the kiln with that piece when it explodes, they all get taken out.

My platter came out of the kiln in two pieces. It had been hit and broke right down the center. But knowing the story of The Lord of the Rings, good against evil, earthquakes, storms, darkness vs. light, I thought, “Well that crack is kinda fitting. Just glue it back together and say there was an earthquake that split the land.

It’s those kinds of things God works with when we are clay in the potter’s hands. God responds to the mistakes we make by saying, “You can learn from this and I can reshape this.” So many times we are on the potter’s wheel and something happens. We make a decision or something unforeseen happens in our lives to set us askew. And God says, “That’s ok. It’s ok. I can work with that. I can use that and you can be so much more powerful of a witness for what I can do with you, and what we can accomplish together.”

But then there’s the other side of what that means. Reshaping what is spoiled. In Jeremiah, God is talking about the people of Israel. The people of Israel are spoiled. They have not followed the way of God; the way of mercy and of love. They have turned away from God and are worshipping Baal. What does God do with those who have turned away?

Last week, the passage we read from Jeremiah was talking about God’s accusations against Israel. “You have given up the spring of living water and built cisterns for yourself that are broken. God is trying to work with Israel. God is trying to be that potter who can change a mistake, a spoiled pot, damaged clay, into something useful for witnessing to the world. But what does that mean?

If we continue reading from Jeremiah, this morning’s passage actually becomes more troublesome. After God is saying I can reshape my people like a potter; I can do with Israel what this potter is doing, God gives a grave warning. In 18 verse 7 and on, God declares,

⁷At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. ⁹And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. ¹¹Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

This last bit, generally is not part of what we want to hear when we're reading this passage. We like the idea that we can be reshaped. We like that God can use us and use our mistakes to give us strength out of our weakness. But then there's that warning. That warning of, "Turn from your evil ways. Turn from your conceit, turn from your greed, turn from all of these things that keep you from me, and from your heart being shaped by the potter.

The thing is, we are not clay. We *can* be clay in God's hands. But clay does not have a choice. Clay does not have a say in how God will shape it. The passage points to the fact that we need to choose, too. We need to be a people of God that are willing to be shaped, willing to be transformed, willing to have our mistakes turned into something powerful for witness.

Which brings us to the Gospel passage. That passage where Jesus uses that word "hate". "Anyone who does not hate father, mother, sister, brother cannot be my disciple." Do we like hearing that? No, we don't. It really makes us question, what is it to be a disciple?

Anyone who does not hate, father, sister, mother, brother cannot be my disciple.

But, Lord, you call us to love. Lord, you call us to be family with one another, and here you are telling us to hate our family. I'm getting a headache trying to reason this through. It doesn't make sense. You're spinning me in circles... Oh wait, I'm on the potter's wheel. I guess that part makes sense.

What does it mean, this idea of the cost of discipleship?

Well, you might have noticed, the title of the sermon is, "A Bonhoeffer Moment." Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor in Germany during World War II and the rise of Hitler. He was very outspoken in terms of what was right and what was wrong. He even wrote a book titled, The Cost of Discipleship. In it, Bonhoeffer talks about what it is to be a disciple. Being a disciple goes further than simply being a follower, or being a scripture reader, or being a church goer. Being a Christian goes farther than going to church every Sunday and enjoying the sermon and singing a few hymns.

I once heard a story about a youth pastor leading a discussion with his youth group. He asked his kids, what does it mean to be a Christian and are *you* a Christian? One of the kids spoke up and said, "Well, yeah I'm a Christian. I come to church every Sunday." In a bout of frustration, the

youth pastor responded, “Well...mm...er... going to church on Sunday doesn’t make you anymore of a Christian than going to McDonalds makes you a hamburger.”

Think about that. Do you walk through the doors of a McDonalds and suddenly become a hamburger? When you walk into a space where we worship God, does that automatically make you a Christian? No. Christian is more than coming to church on Sunday. Christian is a lifestyle, and it’s a lifestyle that challenges us. Bonhoeffer knew that. He proclaimed that word to the people of Germany. He spoke against Hitler and the atrocities happening under Hitler’s regime. Bonhoeffer was speaking out against the hate-filled agenda and crimes befalling Jewish people. He spoke out against the idea of a perfect Arian nation. These things are not Christian. These things are the exact opposite of Christian. They are hatred embodied. That are prejudice enacted.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ cost him his life. Bonhoeffer was imprisoned, and two days before the fall of Hitler, was hung on the gallows for being an outspoken Christian witness.

Do we have that courage? Do we have the strength to stand against those people who would twist the message of Christianity? Do we have the strength to stand up from the pews and go out into the world, taking the message of hope with us?

This is one of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s quotes. “The disciple must say to himself the same words Peter said of Christ when he denied him, ‘I know not this man.’”

Think of your life. Think of what it is. And I’m even going to challenge you to think of your sin. Because, just because we are washed in the blood of Jesus and made innocent, it doesn’t mean we aren’t still sinners. It does not mean we don’t have our challenges in daily life.

I’ve talked with people who’ve come up to me and said, “Well, I don’t know why you’re preaching that Pastor Tom. I am saved by the blood of Jesus. I am not a sinner. I am a saint.” Oh, really? The catholic church declared you a saint? Your life is so pure that there’s no room for improvement? There’s not something that Jesus can still do in your life to make you a better witness of Christian love?

Now I’m not gonna stand here and argue. I’m not gonna stand here and accuse. That’s not my job. You have a conscience that will convict you. We have the Spirit who will convict us in the power and grace of God. I am simply up here to give a message; to share the word that the Christian life is one of sacrifice. The Christian life is one that goes beyond sitting in these chairs.

Martin Luther King, Jr. says this. “When I took up the cross, I recognized it’s meaning. The cross is something that you bare, and that ultimately, you die on.”

That’s an important message. It’s a scary message. Because I will proclaim God all that I can. I wanna go out there in the world and I wanna change lives. I wanna go out there in the world and I wanna stand against the oppressor. I want you to go out there with me and do that. But when Jesus calls us, we need to make sure we know what the cost is. Make sure we know what that means. Make sure we know what baring our cross is going to look like.

There are going to be times of praise. There are going to be times of worship. There are going to be times when you are on that mountain top and Jesus is gonna be right there before you being transfigured, and you're gonna be like, "Yes, Lord, yes! Let's stay here!" And Jesus is gonna answer, "No. If we stay here, we are just as guilty as those who create hate in the world. Our job is down there, in the valley. Our job is down there where hate is reigning. Our job is down there where people are dying. Our job is down there where people are forgetting what love is. Our job is to sacrifice comfort, to sacrifice possession, even to sacrifice family and life, if that's what it calls for."

Martin Luther King, Jr. knew that. But even he wanted to live a long life. "Like anybody, I would like to have a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will."

That is the call of discipleship. It is not to give up things hoped for. It's not to give up everything, but to understand, discipleship may cost everything. There are so many good things in the world, in God's beautiful creation. But they will vanish if we don't follow a lifestyle of discipleship. Freedom vanishes when we allow oppressors to reign. Love vanishes when hate is allowed to remain. Hope vanishes when we allow despair to reign. God calls us to discipleship. God calls us to sacrifice. God calls us to a lifestyle that goes beyond the four walls of this room.

Now we are in a country of freedoms. Freedom of religion, freedom of speech, all of these freedoms. We're proud to be in this country, proud to be Americans and enjoy our freedoms. Elsewhere in the world those freedoms do not exist. Even in this country those freedoms are being threatened... by law, by politics, by hate.

Now I don't like to get political. I hate getting political. It's not a fun way to be and it often creates more arguments and hostilities than it's worth. Or at the very least, it seems to. But I do have this quote from Stephen Mattson, which I think sums up the life of Christianity and kinda reminds us where we need to go.

"Sometimes, being a good Christian meant being a bad Roman..."

Before I read the rest of that quote... In Rome, there were policies and procedures, beliefs, and practices counter to Christianity. Christianity was a religion of peace and pacifism, of love and hope. One of the dangers of Christianity against Rome was soldiers were becoming Christian. What happens when half your army starts turning to a religion that believes in peace and not war? You suddenly don't have an army. This became a problem for Rome.

"Sometimes, being a good Christian meant being a bad Roman. So before you accuse people of being unpatriotic, ask yourself which empire they're actually serving."

As we go out into the world, what empire are we serving? Are we serving capitalism? Are we serving blind patriotism? Or are we citizens of a different world? Are we citizens of the city of God? A government that calls for change and transformation, of love and peace, a government whose law is 'love before all else.' Which empire do we serve, an empire of the world where possessions reign and capitalism is the end all be all, or the empire of God, where we receive new

life each and every day if only we are willing to sacrifice and love and be disciples more than we are church goers?

That's the question I leave you with today.

May God reign supreme.

In Jesus holy name. Amen.