

Can God Change His Mind?

September 4, 2016

Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee Florida

Jeremiah 18:1-11

1 The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: **2** “Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.”

3 So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. **4** 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.

5 Then the word of the LORD came to me:

6 Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

7 At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, **8** 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.

9 And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it,

10 but 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.

11 Now, 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.

POTTERY

I've been watching pottery videos this week.
You might look at some yourself this coming week online.

It's mesmerizing.
These artists can create pots that are absolutely beautiful.

And it looks so quick and easy!

But, of course we know that's not always the case.

The clay can have a mind of its own.
And even a master potter will sometimes find that it is necessary to start over.

We happen to have an artist in our family who makes pottery.

So I asked for her insights.

She confirmed that the clay can indeed be
(as she put it) "temperamental".

Before she starts she has to knead the clay in order to work out the lumps, air bubbles and other imperfections.

These imperfections, as small as they are, are sometimes enough to cause the pot to wobble or tear on the wheel.

Clay that is too soft is easy to shape but is liable to collapse on the wheel.

Clay that is too hard is resistant to collapse, but it is very difficult to shape.

Uneven pressure can cause a pot to collapse.

Having too much or not enough water on the potter's hand can cause the pot to collapse or large sections to tear off.

That's the bad news.

But, the good news is this:

Mistakes in clay can be corrected.

If a large section of clay tears off, the potter can recenter the clay and make something else.

(That's how a serving bowl sometimes becomes a coffee mug!)

And even dried clay can be submerged in water and kneaded back into a usable form.

The only time clay can't be reused and made into something new is the clay that is fired and turned into stone.

POTTERY AND THEOLOGY

So, why all this talk about making pottery?

Well, in today's Scripture lesson the Lord tells the prophet, Jeremiah to

“go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words.”

At the potter's house Jeremiah witnesses what we've been talking about.

The vessel that the potter is making is spoiled.

Maybe the clay was too wet or too dry or had too many imperfections.

But, no worries.

The master potter centers the clay on the wheel and makes something else, whatever suited his whimsey.

And it's at this point that Jeremiah received the Word of the Lord.

The Lord said that the work of the potter mirrors His relationship with Israel.

God is the potter.

The people of God are the clay.

And at this point the people of God are like temperamental clay.

Some are like clay that is too wet, easily shaped by the pagan societies that surround them but then falling apart at the least amount of pressure. And others are like the clay that is too dry, resistant to the gentle pressure and leading of the Lord.

But, for both groups the prescription is the same. God will have to start over and re-form his people in a shape that is in keeping with God's purposes.

JUDGMENT

This is a message of judgment. In re-forming His people God can, at any moment, "pluck up, break down, and destroy."

Today's passage is a flashing warning sign:

"Danger! Judgment is near. Time is short. If you want to turn things around you better act now."

We usually don't like messages of judgment.

In fact, like the folks who first heard Jeremiah's prophecy, we often ignore those messages.

We might even suggest that those who preach a word of judgment are being unfaithful.

We might say something like,

"Judgment is so Old Testament. Gospel means good news, right?"

Christians need to be more positive. We need to be a New Testament church."

But, it's not that simple. Both judgment and salvation play an important role in God's Word ... in the New Testament and the Old Testament.

Think about it this way.

God judges in order to save.

There is a difference between judgment and being judgmental.

Quite often we are judgmental.

We are not gracious.

We are quite harsh in our evaluation of others.

We often judge not to save, but to condemn.

And when we judge, we take a role that is reserved for God alone.

Our judgments are flawed.

But, God's judgment is perfect.

This passage teaches us that God is the potter who gets to decide how He will shape the clay. The clay might be pliable or resistant to the process, but in the end it is the skill of the potter (and not us) that determines the final outcome.

The clay is nothing without the skilled hand of the potter.

And we are nothing without the judgment and salvation of God.

Both of these dynamic forces, judgment and salvation, are necessary in order to shape us into the community that we are called to be.

A RELUCTANT PROPHET

The prophet Jeremiah was a reluctant prophet.

He famously told God that he was too young and too inexperienced to take God's word to the people.

But, God said,

"The important thing is not who you are.

The important thing is who I am.

The power to do the job comes with the call.

After all, before you were even born I had my eye on you."

I can't blame Jeremiah for being reluctant to preach God's word.

He was called to preach a very tough message.

In a time when foreign powers threatened Israel, Jeremiah was called to preach a word of judgment. Jeremiah had the unenviable task of telling the people:

“God is going to judge you for your unfaithfulness and your unrighteous ways.

You lack of success on the battlefield is directly due to the fact that you no longer honor me.

Justice and mercy and right worship are lacking in your country.

If you don't want to be judged your need to change ... NOW!”

How would you like to preach that sermon?

How would you like to tell a threatened nation that the country's misfortune was a judgment from God?

If Jeremiah preached in our time, the results would be the same.

False prophets would denounce him.

Politicians who would seek to eliminate him.

His message would be very unpopular with the people.

He would be despised.

Preaching God's Word is not always an easy task.

Preaching God's Word often involves telling people things that they don't want to hear.

That's why God's prophets had to be courageous.

They had to love God's word more than they loved life itself... because sometimes they lost their life.

CAN GOD CHANGE HIS MIND?

And yet the prophets also had to be optimistic.

They had to believe that people could change in response to God's word.

And they had to believe that God could change in response to what the people did.

This is a very important point.
It is the question asked in my sermon title today,
“Can God Change His Mind?”

Surprisingly the answer is yes.

In verse 8 we read that if an unjust nation repents of her sin, God can change His mind and not bring judgment on them.

On the other hand in verses 9 and 10 we read that God change His mind in the other direction as well.

God can establish a nation.
God can build it up.

But, if that nation turns to evil,
he can change His mind and bring judgment on that nation.

Many other times in the Old Testament we read how God changed His mind.

His judgments were subject to change depending upon what the people did.

This dynamic and changeable aspect of God’s nature are well documented in Scripture.

The stories in the Bible are about the spiritual journey of God’s people.

Sometimes on the trip they were faithful.
But, other times they were unfaithful.

And their actions good and bad, had consequences for their relationship with God.

A GOD WHO CAN ADAPT

Some might be disturbed by this idea that God can change his mind. Many people have what we might call a static view of Providence. Everything happens according to God's "plan."

And when tragedies happen, those who have this viewpoint have to say, "Well, I don't know why God did this or let this happen. But, we just have to accept this as God's will."

There are two very significant problems with this view.

First, it makes God the author of evil, which God most certainly is not. God wants us to turn from evil.

And second, it suggests that we have no personal relationship with God. In this view we are just pawns in a great chess game.

But, the Bible does not put it this way. In the book of Genesis, why does God create the man and the woman?

He creates them for relationship ... with each other and with God.

Now, to be sure this relationship is not an equal one. God is the Creator, and we are the created. God is the Potter, and we are the clay.

But, it is a relationship nonetheless.

Sometimes the clay is too pliable. Sometimes the clay is too stiff.

And that's why God may change His mind. God adjusts to accommodate the weakness of human beings and even the weakness of creation itself.

The work of creation is ongoing. Christians talk about this as the New Creation. God is doing something new in our world.

And it's a process.

You know, things happen in our relationships and in our world that cause us to change our mind.

We have to adjust. We have to adapt. Every day this is true.

Is it possible that the same dynamic is at work with God?

This passage suggests that the answer is yes.

GOD'S CHARACTER NEVER CHANGES

However, don't misunderstand.

Just because God can change don't think that God is somehow fickle or capricious.

God may change in response to the actions of human beings or even problems in the natural world, but one thing never changes.

And that is God's character.

The path we take may vary due to the choices we make.

But, the destination will always be the same because God's purposes remain the same.

It's like the verse we read last week from the book of Hebrews about Jesus.

Jesus Christ is the same
"yesterday, today and forever."

We may fail.

We may fall apart.

Even creation may seem to falter.

But, the nature of God remains the same.

And these eternal promises of God are revealed most clearly in Jesus.

In the life of Jesus we learn that God is always a just and a gracious God.

And this just and gracious God keeps giving us second, third and fourth chances.

God has His prophets speak a word of judgment to us not to destroy us, but to encourage us to turn from our evil ways and go in a different direction.

RE-FORMED

In fact, that's what repentance means.
It means to go in a different direction.

Going in a different direction is always an option in God's world.

Things can always change.
We can change.

And even God can change in response to the changing nature of the clay that God shapes.

The Presbyterian Church is a church in the Reformed Tradition.

What does that mean?
What are we claiming when we say that we are a Reformed Church?

There's a motto that spells it out.

"The church is reformed and is always being reformed by the Word of God."

In other words, we are a work in progress.
The clay on the potter's wheel often needs to be re-formed.

And the same is true of us.

Reformed means to be re-formed in response to the Word of God.

That last part, the part about being reformed in response to the Word of God, is important.
And sadly it is often omitted.

If we are not re-formed by God's Word,
if we just change because we think change is good, then we're not the Church of God.

We're something else.

We're comedian Flip Wilson's church of what's happening now!

And that church does not have a very solid foundation.

The wind and the waves will soon topple it.

JEREMIAH'S DAY AND TODAY

When Jeremiah brought God's Word of judgment and salvation, the religious institutions were still in place. They had a beautiful Temple and elaborate religious rituals.

But, these religious institutions had been co-opted by the ways of the world.

True religion was mixed with pagan practices.
Politicians hired priests who would preach a message that suited their own aspirations.

The faith of God's people had been reformed, but it had not been reformed according to God's Word. It had been reformed according to the ways of the world.

And that led to the disaster of the Babylonian Captivity.

The names have changed, but this same struggle goes on.

There are still those who want to mix up religious ideas in a way that makes no sense.

There are still politicians who want to commandeer faith for their own ends.

And we are all subject to the danger posed by these abuses.

We don't want to be the clay.
We want to be the potter.

We want to go our own way.
We want to do our own thing.

And this allows those who use and abuse religion to prey upon us.

Almost anything can become "religious" to those who have sold their spiritual birthright for the porridge of self-interest and special interest.

So, like Jeremiah, we too need to get down to the Potter's House.

We too need to observe the Master reforming the stubborn clay as seems good to him.

And then we need to hear the Word of the Lord.

We are not the Potter.
We are the clay.

And we are constantly being re-formed to suit the will of the Master.

Sometimes we call this judgment.
And sometimes we call it salvation.

But, it is the same process.

We are changed by the God who is gracious enough to change His mind.

We are changed by the Potter who accommodates his work to the weaknesses and the flaws of the clay.

Can God change His mind?
Thank God He can.

And for our sake He still does.

Amen.