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Jeremiah 18:1-6

Psalms 139:1-18

IN OUR BUSINESS

I have some odd conversations at times. I had a chat with some clay the other day. I have to admit that some of my conversations are rather one-sided. I told the clay that I admired its restraint – that when people walked all over it, that it didn't respond by trying to trip us up. I also let it know that I admired its consistency – not everyone has the same composure from day to day, although on rainy days, I'm sure the clay could get a slight bit tacky and when it is bitterly cold that it might lose a bit of its flexibility. I then told the clay that it was the focus in a scripture reading from the book of Jeremiah. The prophet had been inspired when seeing a lump of clay being worked by a potter into a useful vessel. Suddenly the clay got a good bit more talkative. It said in a rather dry tone – “What if I didn't want to be reshaped into a particular vessel? What if I wanted to just try to be more grounded in my approach to existence, to stay where I had been ever since I was initially formed? What gives even the divine potter the right to displace me and then mold me into something I might not want to become?”

I didn't have a very good answer to such questions, and I turned to the other scripture lesson for the day, to a psalm that talked about how God would be present regardless, as the psalmist asks, “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?” Another line says to God, “You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.” It almost sounds like God is a stalker. Okay, clay, you have a point. Does our molding God keep seeking to shape our lives even when we would rather jump off the potter's wheel? Does our everywhere-present God ever leave us alone when we want to go our own way? Do we have a God who gets in our business too much at those times when we might not want God to be such a dominant presence in our lives? What about human autonomy? Does God not respect our wishes even when we may wish for what isn't best for us?

If we look around at all the forms of human brokenness, it seems apparent that God does allow us to make choices that aren't best for ourselves or for others – child abuse, mass shootings, and actions that lead to climate change come to mind. And yet, God doesn't write off those who make such decisions or those who are the victims of others' decisions.

The Hebrews were held in slavery for a long time, but eventually God liberated them, even though many of the Egyptians weren't too happy about it. The Hebrew people, after their release and escape from slavery, were then not too happy about being stuck in the wilderness for forty years, in part because they did not trust that God could enable them to enter the land that had been promised to them. Yet, that constantly-present God provided food and water for them in a place where such things were scarce. The potter's hands upon them came through the gift of the Hebrew law at a time when they wanted to worship a golden calf. Yes, they resisted God, but God did not withdraw from them. There was a young child I know of, who when he had decided he was going to do something he knew he wasn't supposed to do, he would tell his parents, "Go away. Don't watch me." Of course, the parents realized very quickly that was precisely the most important time to be watching over the child.

There are people who want to exert their influence over others who do not have what is best for the other in mind. Bullies are more interested in having power and dominance than they are in enabling the fulfillment of purpose and well-being of others. God is not a bully. Instead, it is divine love that leads to a deep desire for what is best for people that keeps God from walking away even when we resist.

It might help to realize that the clay imagery in the Jeremiah passage referred to the Hebrew people who weren't doing very well at the time. Powerful, bullying Babylonian forces were about to overwhelm them. It could have been reassuring that rather than the clay only being shaped by the destructive forces pressing in on it, it was going to be reshaped by the God who had cared for it all along. God wouldn't take a 'hands off' approach to the community whose identity had been forged by a long-standing covenant with God.

We don't know the original context of the 139th Psalm. And most biblical scholars do not take the little notes preceding a psalm as authoritative about who wrote it. There is the claim that this psalm was written by David. It may be from his hand or there may have been someone later on who felt like this psalm illustrated what David encountered in relation to God, who then added that it sounded like a psalm David could have written. Indeed, from what we know of David's story, God did have a purpose for his life that was larger than what he could have imagined for himself. That plan was for David's good and for the good of the people over whom David would reign. At various times in David's life, he did not follow God's good will for him. He, as a lump of clay, tried to jump off the potter's wheel instead of being shaped into the vessel God wanted him to be. And yet, God didn't withdraw from David's life. There may have been times when Israel's greatest king felt hemmed in by God's presence behind and before him, but it was the deep divine love that wanted so much for David and his people that kept God there, ever offering a way of redemption, a way toward fulfillment.

A friend of mine tells the story of being in the back yard playing life guard for her young son who was in the kiddie pool. On this particular hot day, she was sipping on a cup of lemonade. Her son had begun to learn about germs in his preschool class and yet he wanted some of what was in his momma's cup. He didn't have the terminology quite right when he asked, "Momma, if I drink from your cup, would I catch your ... dreams?" Of course, he meant to say germs. But it got the mother thinking to herself. "O son, if only you could catch the dreams I have for you by drinking from my cup, dreams of soaring fulfillment and deep love. These are my dreams for you. This is the life I so long for you to have." ¹

Even when we don't have communion, ever before us as we gather in worship is a chalice, formed out of clay. Focusing on such a vessel helps us to catch God's dreams for us. Such a mindset can reshape us into becoming more of a vessel that can lovingly serve others. The chalice is a reminder of God's presence with us and for us through thick and thin as expressed in the person of Jesus Christ,

and the ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is a cup that quenches our deepest thirsts when we drink from it. We can refuse God's gracious offer to get 'in our business,' but the offer, out of God's love, by God's grace, continues to be there for us – literally for us in our Christian formation. And perhaps, we will get to the place where we recognize God's initiative not as a limit to our freedom, but as that which ultimately frees us to become all we were meant to be. Hey, clay, and I am talking to all of us – welcome the touch of the gentle, strong, artistic, divine hands that are shaping us into something useful and oh so good. Thanks be to God.

¹ From a story told by Rev. Eileen Lindner at a Children's Defense Fund event at the Alex Haley farm in Clinton, Tennessee in 2001.