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Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Jeremiah 18:1-6
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Abington Presbyterian Church

GOD'S HANDS

At times, it might help us to better understand who God is by imagining that God has certain body parts. Of course, God is a spirit and only had physical body parts when God was incarnate and present on this earth in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. But scripture in various places uses body imagery for God to help us who are so tied to our bodies better understand who God is. For instance, if we were to think about God's heart, we might say it is the most loving and compassionate heart there is. God is at the other extreme of being heartless. We might even think of our existence as being held within God's heart, because we are God's beloved, and no experience in life or death can separate us from that love.

God's eye is body imagery that helps us to understand that God sees all and knows all. Omniscience is the fancy word for that. In addition to seeing what is, God can see possibilities that go beyond what anyone else can envision. The symbol of the eye in the triangle on the U.S. dollar bill is an image called the all-seeing eye of providence, which helps us to see God as the One who watches over and provides for the material needs of humankind.

When we think of God's ears, we are reminded that God hears even the prayers of the faintest voice, with understanding of every language. God's ears are open to our requests, as well as to our questions and our doubts. God hears our expressions of grief and dismay. God also is glad to hear our praises, as that can help us prioritize what all is going on in-between our ears.

As we imagine the mouth of God, we think about the power of God's speech, that in the first creation story in Genesis indicates that God spoke all of reality into being. That account began with God saying, "Let there be light," and there was light. We also hear God speak through the gift of scripture, through which comes guidance, as well as expressions which can lead to faith and hope. Jesus is considered the One

through whom we hear God most clearly as he is called the word of God in the flesh.

When we think about God's feet, with what has been revealed we can imagine God joyfully journeying with us, never abandoning us, which is important particularly when we are in the most difficult places. Or there is that imagery in one of Jesus' parables of the father running as fast as his feet would take him to welcome the prodigal son back home.

Imagery exploring the nature of God's heart, eyes, ears, mouth, and feet are all ideas that can help us grow in understanding who God is. But for a bit, we focus on God's hands. We do so, exploring the imagery that comes to us through the prophet, Jeremiah. God directed him to go to a potter's workshop. While working with clay on a spinning wheel, the potter had a particular vessel in mind to shape, but we get a sense that the clay does not cooperate with the potter's intentions. However, instead of throwing the clay away, the potter reworks the lump of clay into another vessel so it would be useful. God then claims similarities with the potter while comparing the people of Israel with a vessel being formed in the potter's hands.

I have some friends who were members of a congregation I served previously who have been potters throughout their working lives. I used to love to go by their shop to watch them work at their potter's wheel, shaping a lump of clay into a beautiful, useful vessel. Their hands were quite strong from working with clay that was at times a bit stiff. But they were also gentle and subtle with their hands, where an upward motion with their hands could begin to turn a lump into what would be a vase or a pitcher, something quite beautiful and useful. They would tell me of times when the clay did not seem to cooperate with their plans for what it would become, and they would rework it into something else that would be useful.

Marge Piercy wrote a poem entitled, "To Be of Use." The piece starts with her describing those people who she loves to see jumping right into the midst of meaningful work instead of pontificating on the sidelines. The poem concludes with these words:

*The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.* ¹

I have experienced God's shaping hands in my life as being strong and gentle, as well as purposeful, something for which I am thankful.

God's hands have not always been characterized in that way. Perhaps the most famous sermon in American history is one delivered by Jonathan Edwards entitled, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." The ten-point plus sermon was delivered in Connecticut in 1741, and it is credited with energizing what has been called a Great Awakening religious movement that was centered in New England. The sermon focuses on God's wrath and the strong, but not gentle hands of God who was inclined to throw a lump of clay that didn't shape up into the fires of hell instead of being gently shaped and then fired in a kiln so the clay would become a useful vessel. It describes God's hands as holding a bow bent with divine wrath with an arrow of judgment aimed at our hearts. ² Edwards' focus seems to be on different kinds of divine hands than the God who sits at the potter's wheel.

As one who helps us know about God, I think of Jesus using his hands to signal for children to come to him and then he blesses and embraces them. We hear of him using his hands to touch those considered untouchable and to heal those who had little hope of wholeness. After his resurrection, he shows his nail-scarred hands to Thomas to help him believe.

In our passage from Deuteronomy, Moses indicates that God gave the Hebrew people freedom, on the one hand, to follow the divine commandments which would lead to what was best for all, or to reject God's ways and live in brokenness. We

have the choice to stay on the potter's wheel or not. God's hands open the way to new possibilities, but do not force a particular choice upon us.

Does the way you think about what kind of hands God would have, shape how you think about God? Perhaps that potter's hands imagery can help to form how we understand and can be used by a God whose strong hands are gently placed upon our lives. Yes, we are sinners in the hands of, not primarily an angry God, but in the hands of a patient God, a diligent God, an artistic God, a caring God. Let's allow such a God to shape our hearts, our eyes, our ears, our mouths, our feet, and our hands. One of us might become a Greek amphora, another a Hopi vase lovingly given divine purpose. We do not need to be afraid that God's strong and gentle hands are upon us, as we allow ourselves to be shaped for what could be eternal purposes. Let's not jump off the potter's wheel. Amen.

¹Marge Piercy, "To be of use," from Circles on the Water. Knopf Publishing, 1982.

²https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinners_in_the_Hands_of_an_Angry_God#:~:text=%22Sinners%20in%20the%20Hands%20of,for%20the%20First%20Great%20Awakening