

THE POTTER AND THE CLAY

A SERMON FOR ADVENT
FIRST SUNDAY

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ISAIAH 69:1-9

When I was a child, in the summer time, mostly, but sometimes in the Spring when the wildflowers were blooming and often in the Autumn, when the leaves were at their peak, we would drive the hour or so from our home in Knoxville, Tennessee, to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

We would often leave early, and stop for breakfast at a roadside restaurant in the then-tiny community of Pigeon Forge. Polly showed me a photograph the other day, of the river of lights that is Pigeon Forge seen from the top of Mount LeConte. When I was a youngster, there would have been a pinpoint of light for Trotters restaurant, another for the adjacent motel, one for the old grist mill that ground flour and meal on the site of the old forge, and one for the pottery next door.

Several years ago, someone gave me a couple of pieces from the Pigeon Forge Pottery. They are among those treasures and trinkets that sit on the shelves in my study, the memorabilia of my ministry.

From time to time, I preach on this text from Isaiah, and every time I do, my memory goes back to that pottery, and to the old man who I watched making pots there more than half a century ago.

He had long white hair and a long white beard, sort of the way one imagines an Old Testament prophet. But he wore bib overalls over a blue chambray work shirt, and his eyes matched the fade blue of his shirt.

He would take a lump of clay, and begin by beating it with his fist. Then he would knead it; mash it between his big, rough, gnarled hands. And when he had worked it to the proper consistency, he would throw it down, slam it down on the wheel. Then he would start the wheel spinning with his hand, next pumping the treadle with his foot to keep it rotating. Faster and faster the lump of clay would spin, and then he would begin to shape it, forming it with his fingers, making a hole in the middle with his thumbs, smoothing the outside, until it was shaped the way he wanted it.

Now I never saw the old man make anything as small as this little cream pitcher. But if he had, when he took it off the wheel, he would have pulled and pinched the lip on this side, and then pinched a hole through the other, to create a strip that he would have rolled between his fingers to make the handle.

I can close my eyes and see him doing it, and I can smell the clay, and his musty, sweaty, old man scent.

And I can smell the heat of the kiln, the big oven where the pottery was fired, cooked, baked until it was hard. This little pitcher had a blue glaze, about one shade darker than the old man's eyes, that would have been poured on and fired yet a second time.

Why am I telling you all this?

Because the prophet Isaiah tells us that we are the clay, and God, our Father, is our potter.

The next time you feel like you've been pummeled, pounded, kneaded, squeezed, slammed down, spun around until you are dizzy, then pinched and prodded into shape, and had to stand the heat of a fiery furnace, you may just be in the process of becoming what God wants you to be.

The Book of Proverbs tells us that "whom the Lord loves, He chastens." (13:24)

Sometimes, I feel like the Lord really loves me! Don't you? Don't you ever feel like life is beating up on you, beating you down?

Ever have one of those days when everything is going wrong? When everyone is angry, upset, yelling at you, criticizing you? I've had a couple of those in the past. And I deserved every word of criticism I received.

Whom the Lord loves, He chastens. We are the clay; He is the potter.

Now this little cream pitcher and sugar bowl weren't very big lumps of clay.

They were just a couple of handfuls of mud. But the potter was able to take those lumps of mud and make something both beautiful and functional out of them.

They feel good in my hands. The shape is pleasing to the touch. The outside is rough, a little sandy under my fingertips, and the beautiful blue glaze on the inside is smooth as silk. They aren't perfect. There is a stain or two and the lid to the sugar bowl has a chip out of it.

If I never use them for their purpose, never put a little half and half in the pitcher, a few spoons full of sugar in the bowl, they are still things of beauty, and a reminder of the potter's skill and vision, his craft and his art.

But you know, the potter made them with a purpose. They are vessels meant to contain something. When the potter took that fistful of mud, he could have made something very different, but this is what he chose to shape, to form.

What has God shaped you to be? What has God done with that lump of mud that is you? What are you supposed to contain? And what are you supposed to do with it?

I can't answer that question for you. For the sugar bowl, its purpose is to contain something sweet, that when added to a cup of coffee or tea, makes it sweeter. The cream pitcher is to contain something that will make that coffee or tea less bitter, smoother, lighter in color yet richer in flavor.

If you like cream and sugar in your coffee or tea, you just almost can't drink it without it, can you?

The divine potter shapes us to contain His love, His truth, His message. We are vessels that contain something that is to be added to the world around us, to the lives of others, to make them better, sweeter, fuller.

What we are to contain is the Good News of the Gospel.

If all we had of the gospel could be contained in this tiny pitcher, or this miniature bowl, would it be enough to change the world? I think it would, so powerful, so sweet, so transforming is that good news.

How much of the good news is in you? This little pitcher and bowl are empty, so they do no good at transformation of anything. They are just decorative, not functional. They are not fulfilling the purpose for which they were made.

But you know, if I put cream in this pitcher, and just let it sit, it would soon sour. If I put sugar in this bowl, and let it sit on the shelf, it would become a hardened lump in time.

Even if you are filled to overflowing with the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, if you do not share it with others, if you do not pour it out, if you do not spoon it out, your purpose is still unfulfilled.

The Prophet Isaiah is confessing the sin and hopelessness of the nation of Israel. In our text this morning, he says "in our sins we have been a long time." And he asks, "Shall we be saved?" (Verse 5).

We know the answer. We know that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for our sins and that in Jesus Christ all our sins are fully and freely forgiven.

That is the cream in our pitchers, the sugar in our bowls.

Pour it out, spoon it on, till all the world knows the fullness, the sweetness, of the good news of the gospel of the one whose Father is our Father, and the potter to our clay.

Let us pray.

O Lord, we pray the words of old Daniel Iverson: Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me. Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me. Amen, and amen.