

Today we are going to be turning to the Old Testament and reading one of my favorite passages of Scripture. This story that we are going to read describes the artwork of an artist. A potter actually. In this story we are being invited into a potter's house to catch a glimpse of how this potter operates.

Many times we have an idealistic view of potters. We imagine that a potter takes a piece of clay and slowly shapes it and then each piece turns out perfectly. But as any artist knows there are lots and lots of unfinished paintings and broken pots along the way. Creating and re-creating is part of what must happen for beautiful artwork to be completed.

The character who is symbolically invited to see the work of the potter is Jeremiah. Jeremiah is a prophet who lives during a difficult time for the people of God. Jeremiah is a prophet in Judah which is the last remnant of biblical Israel. He lives around 600 years before the birth of Jesus.

In the time of Jeremiah, Judah is on a downward spiral which is going to result in the nation being conquered and most of the people taken off into slavery. The text that we are about to read was probably written while Jeremiah saw the inevitable. Jeremiah knew that the remnant of God's people were about to be conquered.

Seeing their country conquered becomes a faith crisis for the people. They assumed that God would always protect them and prevent bad things from happening to them. But they are discovering something different and Jeremiah uses human imagination to convey a message that God is not abandoning them but that God is reshaping them because of their disobedience.

Read Jeremiah 18:1-11

Here we have an artist's rendering of what it looks like for God to tear something apart and then to make something new. We like the making all things new but the tearing apart stuff we don't like very much.

In this passage that we read, Jeremiah is invited into the potter's house. In the potter's house Jeremiah is invited to catch a glimpse of how God acts. In this potter's house we are told that the piece of pottery is spoiled and must be reworked.

Jeremiah is then told that this spoiled pottery is God's people who must be reworked into something new. Tearing apart and making something new is what God is in the business of doing. And if we are seeking to be faithful to God then we will seek to join God in what God is doing.

Author and Pastor Tony Campolo tells the story that happened to him in a diner at 3:30 in the morning that I think gives witness to what it means for something to be broken apart and then something new created. This story happened because Campolo was willing to allow God to take him to places that many of us would never imagine going.

Campolo flew to Hawaii and was suffering from jet lag so he found himself awake at 3:30 am and hungry. He found a little diner that "was one of those sleazy places that deserves the name 'greasy spoon.'" Campolo recalls, "I mean I did not even touch the menu. I was afraid that if I opened the thing something gruesome would crawl out. But it was the only place I could find open."

Campolo ordered coffee and a donut and sat down to eat it. As he sat there the door to the restaurant swung open and in marched 8 or 9 boisterous and provocative prostitutes. Campolo was ready to leave when he overheard one of the women say, "Tomorrow is my birthday. I am going to be 39." Her friend responded, "So what do you want from me? A birthday party?" The first woman then revealed, "I've never had a birthday party."

Campolo then made a decision. After the women left he went up to the cook behind the counter. "Do these women come here every night?" "Yeah," the cook answered. "How about the one who says she is having a birthday? Is she here every night?"

"Yeah, that's Agnes. She's here every night." Campolo then asked the cook, "Do you think that tomorrow we can have a birthday party for her?" "That's a great idea," the cook responded. "Agnes is one of those nice and kind people that no one ever does anything nice for."

Campolo then set about planning a birthday party for Agnes. He arrived the next morning at about 2:30 am. He decorated the diner. The cook volunteered to bake a cake.

Word got out about the party because at about 3:15 am the diner began filling up with prostitutes. It was wall to wall prostitutes and Pastor Tony Campolo. At 3:30 am the door to the diner swung open and in came Agnes and her friend. The crowd then all screamed, "Happy birthday."

Campolo says that he has never seen someone so stunned. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle. Every one sang "Happy birthday" to Agnes. When the birthday cake with 39 candles was carried out she lost it. She openly cried. The candles were all blown out and she was handed a knife and invited to cut the cake.

Agnes looked down at the cake and then said, "If it's OK with everyone I don't want to cut the cake yet. I want to take it to my home and show my mother." And that is what she did. After she left there was a strange silence because no one knew what to do. At that moment Campolo asked if he could lead them all in a prayer.

After Campolo finished the prayer, the cook leaned over the counter and said, "You never told me that you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?"

Campolo responded, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 am in the morning." The cook responded, "No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that."

What negative attitude within us is God trying to break apart? What destructive behavior is God inviting us to change? What relationship within our family is God wanting us to change the way we relate to that person? What about this church is God inviting us to change because we have gotten stuck in old and ineffective patterns?

Today is World Communion Sunday. Today is a day we are invited to share communion with people all around the world.

What is God inviting us to join in with God to break, destroy, or stop so that God can create something new in its place? AMEN.

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-Campolo, Tony, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, Word Publishing, Nashville, p.216-220

-Given: Oct. 2, 2016 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)