

It is amazing to me to discover how many ways ancient people could reuse broken pottery. Once it is broken, it can only be thrown away, right? At least, that is the modern view of broken things. You know how it is. We modern North Americans come to a point that we no longer have a use for something, and it heads to our overflowing landfills. Oh, maybe we try to run things through Goodwill or a rummage sale when we are done with them. Even so, our idea is that once we no longer have a use for something, or if something no longer works as we expect it to work, then it is to be hauled away from our homes, never to be seen again.

So I cannot imagine anything more worthless than a broken, shattered ceramic pot. Surely a shattered jar can only be swept up and thrown out of the way of useful and current and life-assisting things. So it is fascinating to me to see just how these useless bits of former usefulness can be reborn, thanks to the imagination and creativity of ancient people.

I remember walking through the ruins of one ancient trading town, out in the middle of an arid desert. Nicely squared stones had constructed the foundations and the walls of the buildings of this town. Mortar had been used to glue all of these stone building blocks together. Then, pressed into the mortar, long ago while it was still moist, were rows and rows of little broken pottery shards. All different colors and shapes, sometimes just in simple rows between the blocks, and sometimes in patterns like crude mosaics, these shards added a distinctive flavor to the architecture of that particular village. I guess someone hated to see all those shards lying around and going to waste.

When I worked on a dig in Israel last summer, one of my responsibilities was to wash and catalogue all the pottery fragments that were found. I was amazed to find quite a few pieces that had been ground down around the edges and reshaped into little disk-like, circular shapes. These were reused as stoppers for jars. One of the most amazing finds of our dig was a letter written not on paper or parchment, but a large shard of broken pottery. Such ostraca, or letters written on broken pottery with ink, were quite common in ancient times. Just because something appears to be hopelessly broken, it doesn't mean that it cannot continue to be useful.

This is important to keep in mind when one reads of God's judgment and discipline in the Old Testament. Many people today read passages such as today's lesson from Jeremiah, and then say something like, "I really don't like to hear about God wanting to destroy people. Can we hear about Jesus telling us how much we are loved instead?"

Well, God loves us very, very much, but God also knows human beings very, very well. God knows that people do not always choose to behave in loving ways toward one another. That is why God called a certain people to show the entire world how to live in the justice and compassion of God. That certain people was the people of Judah and Israel. However, they were not living according to their call. Earlier in the Book of Jeremiah, in chapter 7, Jeremiah delivers a sermon in the temple in Jerusalem. He questions if the temple has turned into a "den of robbers," which is quoted by Jesus much later. In this Temple Sermon, Jeremiah repeatedly calls to the people to "amend their

ways,” just as he does when he tells them about the potter and the clay. He even gives examples of what amending their ways looks like. He says, “If you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly with one another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood....” Of course, “the alien” does not mean the beings landing in Roswell, New Mexico. It means people who are not Israelites or Jews. “The orphan and the widow” is pretty straightforward for modern readers.

But the people are not living up to their call. God cannot allow them to represent the ways of Heaven on earth if they continue to behave just any old way, particularly if they take advantage of defenseless people. They will have to be destroyed as a country, as a noble nation, for their nobility has deteriorated into greed, and their call to be a blessing to others has been long forgotten in their scramble to name themselves Number One in the world. God has no choice but to abandon them, and allow other nations to subsume them.

Unless! Yes, there is an “unless.” Unless God changes God’s mind. What? Does this mean that God is capricious, changeable, and maybe even moody? If God knows all things, and if God is unchanging, and if God has an immutable vision for all of creation, then how can God change God’s mind?

I think most of you can be better theologians that you realize. A lot of you are parents, even more of you have parents. You know that if a child does not behave well, that child will be corrected, that is, if the parent is on deck and doing what parents need to do. If the bad behavior continues, well, then the child is grounded, or some such thing that limits the child. But, if the bad behavior changes, really and truly changes, then nobody needs to be grounded!

So God’s judgment is similar. God’s judgment is not whimsical. If God has any integrity or concern for the world, God will give lots and lots of chances for people to change their ways. But if they don’t catch on to those chances, God will have no choice but to step in and administer some type of punishment in order to stop the behavior that has gone out of control. God cares very much for the chosen people, but God also cares for the people that may be run over and crushed by the chosen people, too.

But there is a way to make God change God’s mind. It isn’t hard to understand, either. It isn’t a long complicated thing, as a matter of fact, it can be summarized in two words: shape up!

That’s right. Our behavior is the critical concern. Are we bringing God’s justice and compassion to the world through our hearts and hands and voices? Or are we participating in other priorities and powers of the world, either overtly or covertly? Only a God that is consistent in love and judgment will insist that we change if we are not reflecting that divine love and judgment. And if we are not following the way of God, then that consistent God must intervene in painful ways. However, that same consistency

of God will allow for God to change if – and this is the big if – if we shape up, if we change and realign ourselves with God’s love and justice for the world.

So at one point in the history of the people of God, things got so bad that God had to send a prophet named Jeremiah. And Jeremiah warned the people that they were looking like a clay pot that wasn’t coming out right in the potter’s workshop. And then Jeremiah continued to warn them that their misshapen waywardness would cause God to have to punch down their clay form and bring the unintended form to a stop.

And to our ears, that sounds like God no longer loves the people, at least at first hearing. However, the clay pot is being terminated in order to be reborn, in order to be refashioned, in order to get a new beginning. Yes, God may need to destroy a people that have become murderous and uncaring, but it is in order to remake them, so that they have another chance to live into the form that God’s love and compassion can mold them to become.

But before that smashing down begins, God gives the people many, many chances to reform themselves. God may change God’s mind, if the people respond to the warnings given by the prophets. It is amazing that God doesn’t just give up on us, and throw a stubborn lump of clay out of the potter’s workshop, never to be used again. But chances are given for change, and when the changes don’t occur, God has no choice but to use the tough love of intervening, and send things in a different direction.

Things don’t turn out as intended in our world. Marriages are not all made in heaven, loved ones do not live as long as we would wish, wars flame into action for reasons that are not always published, the excitement of production may result in the destruction of our habitat, nice guys and gals may end up finishing last. We may be ready to give up on this world for many reasons. But God refuses to give up. Just like an ancient hand finding a pot shattered beyond all use, and dusting off a piece of it to be reshaped into the usefulness of a stopper that will keep precious water within a jug in a dried up landscape, God persists in hope. God is with us when our world frustrates us and beats us down. It is in those moments of despair and brokenness that God says, “Let me help you up. We still have things to do.”

May God be praised for loving us, for warning us, for correcting us, for redeeming us, and most of all, for never giving up on us! Amen.