

**Lent Midweek Potter and Clay Jeremiah 18:1-6
Bethlehem Lutheran Church**

**March 11, 2009
Pastor Laura Ziehl**

The Lord said to the people, “Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O Israel.” That is both an ominous and comforting thing -- to be shaped by God and to be held by God. Do you know what it’s like to be molded by the master potter? To be shaped by him, in sorrow and in joy? Has your life been touched by refiner’s fire and does your spirit bear witness to the cracks and chips that come with life in this world? For nearly all of us, the answer is yes. The master potter is at hand, and it seems God never tires of his work with the clay of our lives. His pace with us, like the pace of a skilled potter, is unhurried and careful. You and I are interested in the finished work, but he is interested in the process that makes us whole. And each day God adds to us; a bit of hope, a touch of peace.

Throwing pots is no task for amateurs. If you watch a skilled potter at work it seems simple and effortless. But it is not so. I learned this at Holden Village. Pastor Daren and I were in the village some years ago. Holden has, among other things, a potter’s barn with several wheels for the guests to use. Pastor Daren decided that, rather than start with a simple pot, he would go right to a chalice and he set to work. Emily, who was 4 at the time, and I watched. It took awhile to get the clay centered, but slowly the chalice began to take shape. Then suddenly, for no apparent reason, it listed slightly to the left and within seconds, it wasn’t a chalice anymore, but bore a striking resemblance to the lump of clay it had been at the beginning. Emily and I said nothing. We thought it best.

Daren worked for a long time. Tenacity is one of his spiritual gifts. So is stubbornness. Again a chalice slowly took shape. Emily and I went for a hike and came back. He was just adding a few more details to the base. We ate lunch and came back. He was just adding a hint of curve to the cup of the chalice and making sure the lip was even. We went for ice cream, we wove placemats. And we came back. The chalice was nearly perfect – just a little uneven. Just as Daren reached to lay the last perfect touch on the chalice, it collapsed in his hands. In the silence that followed, he took a deep breath -- and started the wheel again. Did I mention tenacity is one of his spiritual gifts? The sun went down and rose again. Other than sleep, he was at the wheel. And he did succeed, of course. And this he learned. You cannot ask perfection of

the clay. The more you work with it, tinkering here and tinkering there, trying to make it just right, the more the overworked clay in your hands weakens and then collapses.

A skilled potter knows when to stop. His strong hands mold the pot, but he knows when to stop. He stops when the pot is beautiful and before it is perfect. This is an important distinction. How often do we strive for perfection, in ourselves and those we love, until the pot collapses in our hands? Not so with God. He leaves in us, potential yet to be realized. His hands are at work in us, not for a moment, but for a lifetime. Slowly does he shape us. Imperfections are left in us, with his intentionality, for strange as it seems, they are essential to our strength. His work forges life in us over decades. I have watched a master potter at work. And as I looked at imperfections he intentionally left and would smooth later, I saw my imperfections in a new light -- as design of the creator, for the purpose of strength.

For, we were made intentionally of clay. Our fragility is of God's design. When God knit us together, he had many choices from the creation he had formed. He had available to him granite and stone, grass and stream -- yet he chose to take us from the dust of the earth. A friend of mine, who is a potter, told me, why he prefers clay as his artistic medium. Wood and stone, he said, once cut or altered, cannot be changed. But clay can be added too, as it is needed; subtracted from, when necessary. Such is the nature of God's work in us. He took us from the clay and breathed life into us. He still does. And then he began his work in us.

You are formed according to the image of the master potter's heart. May you feel his hand tonight touching your weakness. May you feel his presence tonight, shaping your strength. For, beloved one of God, his gentle hand is at work in you now. He is not finished with you yet. Nor shall he ever be. Amen