

September 4, 2016
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon - "In the Potter's Hands"

As I read this morning's scripture passages I can't help but wonder if the Lectionary Committee understood that this is the last Sunday of summer vacation.

Did they not realize that we might want to kick back a bit today, relax, maybe hear some stories about children being healed or bountiful harvests?

Instead we get Psalm 139 telling us that we cannot hide from God – God is everywhere we are.

God was even there when we were formed in our mother's womb.

Next we hear from Jeremiah that we are clay in God the Potter's hands.

This powerful, molding God, can reshape us any time he chooses.

This potter can also fashion enemies and tribulations, as needed to draw our attention to our shortcomings.

And Luke – my goodness – the cost of discipleship is your family, your friends, your possessions –

Jesus wants all of us, no matter what it costs.

Whew. Not exactly the best recruiting texts.

Hey, come to my church, you will be challenged to be watched, weighted and judged!

Is that a bad thing?

What if we look at these scriptures from another angle?

Rather than the somewhat adolescent approach of resisting all this omnipotence and omnipresence, what if we rested easy in the extraordinary comfort of knowing that God who created us – is ever shaping us and demands only that we love God back.

When I look at all three scripture passages from this angle I am reminded that loving God is the bedrock of my life and that it informs everything that I do.

When I remember that God created me, loves me and made me a pliable being that can be changed with time my anxiety vanishes.

When I acknowledge that God is in charge and God is much more powerful than I, I can relinquish the need to control everything.

When God tells me that God will judge my enemies, I am relieved of the burden of anger, grudges and revenge.

When I listen carefully to Jesus' admonition to leave family and friends behind to follow him, I understand that my being – who I am – is not dependent on how other people view me.

When I am following Christ my relationships are rich and whole and nourishing.

When I place God first, my entire life is enriched.

One commentator expounded on it this way: "Jesus' promise of abundant life can trip us up if we view it through the lens of our world's values.

If we think of abundant life as an individual experience of security, wealth and instant gratification, we miss Jesus' point entirely, and we will be sorely disappointed by our faith.

But, if we can break free of this self-centered, short-term, "quick-fix" view, we will discover something far richer – a life that connects us more deeply with God, others and our world, and that brings well-being to all through the values of simplicity, service and sacrifice. (that might be a good mission statement: simplicity, service and sacrifice.)

It is easy to see that this offer of abundant life is costly and goes against the culture of our society – and this is why the Scriptures warn us against taking our faith lightly, or responding to Jesus too easily.

In a world where the instant and the immediate are valued over the lasting and the long-term, embracing a lifetime of learning to live the Jesus way can be hard to conceive of, let alone to do.

But, as we choose afresh each day to value God's Reign above our own small empires, and the short-term rewards of our world, we move deeper into union with God, and our whole frame of reference slowly changes.

Then, over time, our lives begin to reflect the life-bringing grace, compassion and justice of Jesus – and that is good news for us and for those whom our lives touch."¹

We cannot escape the world stage.

The epidemic of violence, hatred and fear has contaminated every part of our life.

It's as if a virus has spread among human beings that is slowly eroding well-being, our concept of divinity, our idea of the beloved community.

Each new revelation of people lying, cheating and hurting their neighbors leaves us with a sense of inevitability.

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We have begun to expect bad behavior in other people.

This expectation has led to an acceptance of human frailties as the status quo.

Acknowledging our brokenness has always been a hallmark of Christian faith.

We have always admitted that we need God's help – it is what we pray for – forgive us our debts, our trespasses, our sins as we forgive our debtors, those who trespass against us, our enemies.

We confess our sins and pray for God's mercy, forgiveness and grace.

Celebrating our brokenness is new.

Drawing public attention to our frailties, giving voice to our sinful behavior is a new cultural development.

Rather than being ashamed of our weaknesses or afraid of God's judgment we seem to be taunting God with our bad behavior.

We are like teenagers testing God the Father's boundaries -- trying to figure out just how awful we can be before God intervenes or stops loving us.

Part of our cultural posturing is to profess to be afraid of nothing.

Even God.

We broadcast our bravado, claiming to be the strongest, the smartest, the most talented – as if we have accomplished those things on our own.

We forget Jeremiah's words: *Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand.*

Created and crafted by God.

God the omnipotent.

God the omnipresent.

I don't think there is anything wrong with being afraid of God.

God is incredibly powerful and we ought to be in awe of that power.

We ought to recognize that there is a force greater than our own ego, one that can choose to take our lump of clay and through it back on the wheel, reshaping us so that we truly reflect God's holy image.

My friends, we gather here each week to hear the word of God and to meditate on its meaning in our lives.

Today we hear strong words – words of comfort and words of hope –words to live by.

Place yourself in God’s hands.

Let God work out the flaws and inconsistencies that mar you.

Let God’s love shape you into the person you were meant to be.

Daniel Iverson’s 1926 hymn could have been called “The disciple’s prayer”:

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.