

“Honest to Goodness”

Jeremiah 18:1-11

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This morning our attention is drawn to one of the most honest and hopeful texts in the Old Testament. It presents each of us with a clear choice and challenge, just as it did the ancient Israelites for whom it was written.

“This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: ‘Go down to the potter’s house, and there I will give you my message.’” (Jeremiah 18:1-2)

Who was Jeremiah? He was a prophet that lived in Judaea over three hundred years after the reign of King David and his son, Solomon, and six hundred years before the time of Christ.

He had the longest prophetic career of all the Hebrew prophets. For forty years, Jeremiah spoke to his people about God’s expectations of them and God’s dreams for them.

As time passed, it became clear to Jeremiah his people were not living up to God’s expectations as outlined in the covenant God made with Moses. Instead of reflecting the heart and nature of God by being honest, trustworthy, reliable, dependable, fair, generous, merciful, compassionate, humble and sensitive to the needs of the weakest among them, the Israelites grew more militaristic, materialistic, selfish, greedy, corrupt and indifferent to the plight of the poor.

They were far more concerned about what they wanted as they went about their daily lives than what God wanted for them as a people of faith. Jeremiah knew their self-serving

attitude was eroding the foundation of their society. He feared they would not survive as a nation if they continued to go down this path.

Jeremiah also knew their behavior was breaking God's heart. The people God called to be a role model for creating healthy communities by pursuing justice and peace behaved and believed eerily similar to every nation around them. Their values and priorities appeared to be no different, along with their problems.

Was God going to give up on the Israelites? Would God turn from them and let them suffer the consequences of their wicked behavior with no hope for redemption?

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What did Jeremiah see when he went to the potter's house? He observed a potter working with a lump of clay to make a vessel.

During the process, something went wrong. Evidently, there was a flaw in the clay which made it collapse on the potter's wheel.

Instead of throwing the clay away, however, the potter worked the flaw out of the clay and proceeded to make another vessel. I can see a smile come across Jeremiah's face as he silently watched the potter at work.

Jeremiah had the answer to his question. God was not through with the Israelites. Instead, God was committed to restoring this broken relationship in the midst of his disappointment and pain.

What did Jeremiah tell his people based upon his visit to the potter's shop? He pleaded with them to respond to God's mercy and grace by turning from their selfish ways so they could once again become known as the people who acted justly in all circumstances, loved mercy at all times and walked humbly with God every day.

How does this powerful story speak to us today? I pondered this question for some time last week. Let me share some ideas for you to consider.

For me, this story is about second chances. It is about starting over when you thought all hope was gone.

Why is this so important? All of us have started things that did not go as we had planned.

We have made commitments we did not keep. We have made unwise decisions that undermined and sabotaged our promises. We have deceived ourselves and others in order to satisfy our selfish desires. We have disappointed those who believed in us, and we have neglected the people who needed us the most.

Must we forever live with our guilt and shame? Can we find redemption and move in a new and better direction?

This story makes it very clear that we can. With God's help and the assistance of others like Jeremiah, we can dream new dreams and chart a new course.

It will not be easy. It will require the highest levels of honesty, commitment, courage and determination. We'll have to own up to our mistakes and apologize to all we have hurt.

We'll have to adopt a humble attitude and listen to the people who know more about making wise decisions and keeping promises than we do. We'll have to be disciplined enough every day to say no to anything harmful and yes to all things good. We'll have to rely upon those closest to us to hold us accountable.

Failure never has to have the final word in our life. More chapters can be written to our story if we place our life back in God's hands and let God help us rebuild.

Are you ready to do this? Are you ready to be shaped by this potter who has a vision for your life beyond what you can see for yourself?

I pray you are, but I must warn you. Delay is dangerous. Time can run out.

The most crippling consequences of your mistakes will not be held back forever. Even God will let them come crashing down upon you if you persist in making bad decisions.

The people who love you and want the best for you can run out of patience, too. If you trample over their love and continue to abuse them, they will have no choice but to let you slide deeper into this pit of despair. They will not let you destroy them and all the other people they feel it is their duty to protect.

Surely this is not what you want. This morning, why don't you place yourself back on the potter's wheel and let God transform you into something beautiful and useful.

At the revival I conducted last week in Georgetown, one of their members, Roy Tudor, shared the following story with me. It speaks directly to today's text and message.

As a young adult with a growing family, Roy's dad became a boxer to supplement his income. He would go into the ring on weekends at county fairs or other sporting events in the area. When Roy showed an interest in boxing as a teen, his dad gave him some lessons.

His dad began by telling him there are two keys to every successful boxer. When a boxer gets knocked down, he must get back up, and every time he goes into the ring, he must have good people in his corner.

If you will get back up, we'll be in your corner. I am confident God will be, too.