

Jeremiah 18:1-11 (NRSV)

The Potter and the Clay

18 The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²“Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” ³ So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴ The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

⁵ Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁶ Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. ⁷ At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸ but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. ⁹ And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰ but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. ¹¹ Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 (NRSV)

¹⁵ See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ¹⁶ If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰ loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

The potter's Hands

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Texts: Jeremiah 18:1-11; Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Some of you will remember Monty Hall and the television show "Let's Make a Deal." At the end of each show came the "big deal." There were three doors. Behind each door was a prize, and behind one of them was a grand prize—a car or a big vacation or something like that. The drums would roll. The contestant would fidget and groan. Some stared at the doors as if they would suddenly acquire x-ray vision. Others furrowed their brows in concentration as though the gift would send a signal via ESP. Finally, Monty Hall would demand the choice. What door do you choose? One, two or three? Usually with nervous reluctance the contestant would call out a number, "Number two." Every door was a one in three chance. You were twice as likely to lose as to win. The door would open. Suddenly the tension released itself. The audience groaned or, once out of three times, it wildly cheered. In that case, everyone, including Monty Hall jumped for joy. The contestant had chosen the right door and had won the prize.

This morning we see God in the role of Monty Hall. The people Israel are near the end of their sojourn in the wilderness. For forty years they have wandered, stumbled, bumbled and griped. But at last they are on the threshold of the promised land. The Jordan is before them; Canaan is in sight.

At this moment, at the end of the show in the wilderness, as it were, God steps up to the people. God takes the microphone and declares, "I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ... I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live."

There they are—two doors, better odds than the television show version. God gives the Israelites a 50-50 chance. "Choose the right door," says God, "and you live—life, blessings, prosperity. Choose the wrong door and you die—death, curses and adversity." It's just as simple as that. Choose the right door.

So, is that how it was? Or do you find this characterization of God offensive? Do you think God offered the Israelites life or death by lottery? No, I doubt it. I imagine that most of us believe that when God set the choice of life and death, blessings or curses before the people, the doors were completely open. The people could see what was behind them. It wasn't a game show. It wasn't entertainment. God said to the people, "Look, it's really up to you. There's a right way to live, and there's a wrong way. The choice is clear. Choose the right way and live; choose the wrong way and die." I believe that's the way it was. Hey, I even believe that's the way it is. I think God gives us that choice in every age and in every life.

So here's my question. If God gives us the choice between life and death, blessings and curses, and if the doors are open so that the choices are plain to see in front of us, why have human beings throughout history so frequently chosen the ways of death and destruction?

As I pose that question, I am reminded of the senator who had a terrific speech writer. Throughout the senator's career, truth be told, it was the speech writer who formulated the ideas,

initiatives and policies that made the senator a success. The senator had relied so much on the speech writer that he, the senator, didn't even have to read the speeches in advance. The speech writer was that good. The senator, however, was glad to bask in the glow of his fame without so much as a word of thanks to his speech writer. Finally, the speech writer decided to resign and take a position with another senator. Again, the senator uttered not a word of thanks to the speech writer for essentially doing the senator's job. All the senator said was, "Look, I have a speech this week, which I want you to write before you leave."

The senator stood up with this final speech from his speech writer. The senator could see from the first page that the speech writer had outdone himself. The speech was spectacular and bold. "Ladies and gentlemen, I think we can all agree that our country is in need of vision and initiative. This great nation is beset with woes. There is moral decay in our cities and among our young people. Racism continues to plague us fifty years after the civil rights movement. The American worker is worse off in this century than in the last. And our government has lost its way. But I stand before you, ladies and gentlemen, to outline the steps that are necessary to refocus this great country. I bring you not generalities and platitudes. I bring you detailed, substantive and concrete ideas." The senator was roused by the power of his own rhetoric. This was incredible. He turned the page, ready to go. But all that was on the next page was a short handwritten note: "You on your own now, buddy," signed "Your speech writer."

I feel a bit like that senator. The question we need to address this morning is why do human beings so often choose the ways of death if the ways of life and death have been placed before us, openly and clearly? And since the sages throughout the ages have not solved the question, or at least the situation, it would be nice to have a good speech writer to rely on, rather than to be staring at a blank page.

However, some of the senator's bravado may have caught hold of me, for I do think we can gain some understanding this morning of why we choose death over life. The simple answer is that even though God placed the choices clearly before the Israelites in the wilderness, and even though God continues to place the choices clearly before us, we very often don't believe God. We don't believe that the God has actually given us the right choices.

Think of the parables and stories and sayings of Jesus. In the Good Samaritan Jesus tells the story of a man from Samaria, from Samaria where the people are all trash. Jesus tells the story of a man from Samaria who is a better person and better friend than the most upstanding people in Israel. But Jesus' hearers rejected his story, because they knew better about the Samaritans. The Samaritans were not worthy of their respect, and no story of Jesus' was going to change their mind.

Another time he said that if someone strikes you on one cheek, you should turn the other one for him to strike. Who actually believes that? I've heard more times than I can count, "That's a nice sentiment for Sunday School, but don't be so naive as to think you can actually live like that."

In another story Jesus tells us about workers in the vineyard. Some worked all day. Some worked half a day. Some worked just an hour or so. In the end, they all got paid the same—a full day's wages. But the workers who worked all day howled at the unfairness of it. And most people I know agree with them. In this story Jesus wants to say that God loves us so much that we can be redeemed, can be paid the whole wage, no matter how late we turn to God, but many of us think Jesus got it wrong. You're supposed to get what you've earned and no

more.

In another place he said that the love and attachment to wealth is the root of all evil. He told the story of the rich young man who was willing to give anything but his money. He said you cannot serve God and money. But we usually don't believe him. Or we say that we don't really love our money when we really do.

And in another place he took a child to his lap and said that if you wanted true greatness you had to become like this child. Having spent a few weeks with my two grandsons, I'm pretty sure Jesus is talking about behaving like a child. But I suspect that he was talking about the fact that young children have not yet become driven by fame or wealth or high honor. But most of us have a lot of trouble believing that acting with the innocence of a child is the way to greatness.

From the beginning of time God has pointed out the ways of life and death. In most respects they are not that mysterious. As Deuteronomy says, they are placed before us. But one of the real problems is that we just don't believe we are supposed to love our enemies, turn the other cheek, or be glad for God's acceptance of someone who hasn't worked as hard for God's love as we have.

But it gets even worse. Many are so convinced of what they believe that they start saying that they heard it from God. In some circles today you can find what is called the prosperity gospel. The prosperity gospel says that if you put your faith in God, you will become rich. Even though there is plenty of evidence in both the Old and New Testament that whatever God means in promising blessings, prosperity and life, with all due respect, it does not mean becoming Donald Trump. Time and again the scriptures tell us and the old hymn has it, "Jesus calls us from the worship of the vain world's golden store." And yet there are some who say their gospel of wealth comes right from the Bible, right from the lips of God.

Six years ago Tuesday a group of men hijacked airliners and intentionally crashed them into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and a field in Pennsylvania. Thousands of innocent men and women perished in their hands. As each crew of hijackers slashed the throats of crew members and again as they were about to crash, they shouted God is great. In their minds God told them to become holy vigilantes. They followed their own hatred and convinced themselves that they got from God, this despite the fact that any reasonable rendition of their faith says exactly the opposite.

And lest we think we escape this particular fault, let us be reminded that we have our own problems in our ideology of God bless America. Thousands upon thousands of Iraqi civilians, not to mention the combatants on both sides, have lost their lives at least in part because our government convinced itself that the invasion was doing God's work, even though the Bible and Jesus would clearly enough suggest otherwise.

We human beings are amazing. We can see what God says and say, "Well that sounds pretty nice, but when push comes to shove, we know better." So much better do we believe we see things that we confuse what we say with what God says. We end up quoting ourselves but we attribute what we say to God. If it weren't so tragic, it would actually be amusing.

I have one question left. Is there any hope for us? I had a friend who was a free-lance photographer who got into some kind of tax mess in an IRS audit. He was telling me about, and in a feeble attempt to commiserate with him, I said, "Wow, when you're dealing with the IRS, there's no hope."

"No hope," he said. "You're a minister. Hope is what you are supposed to be selling."

He was right. And I am glad to say that there is hope. As grim as the human condition seems to be, there is hope.

In Jeremiah God gives us a wonderful metaphor. God says, “Come, go down to the potter’s house.” And Jeremiah says, “So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.” The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

The priest and public policy expert Brian Hehir often quips that original sin is the one doctrine of the church for which there is empirical evidence. What he means in terms of what we are talking about this morning, I think, is that there is plenty of evidence that left to our own devices we will choose the ways of death over the ways of life, not because we prefer death, but because, quite simply, we don’t believe God about which is which. The hope, then, comes in allowing ourselves to be reworked, reshaped, remade, remolded and redone at the potter’s wheel. The hope comes when we can admit that we are prone to seeing things incorrectly, and that we need to allow God makes us new and different. In Arabic Islam means to submit to God. Rather than submitting to our own proclivities, rather than holding fast to what we believe and what we want to believe, we will do better to submit to the potter’s hands who will make us into beautiful vessels rather than spoiled lumps of clay.

Come, go down to the potter’s house. Amen.