

Shaped by the Potter

Proper 18 c

Dt.30:15-20 Lk.14:25-33

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I was intrigued by the bulletin art for today. It's a painting of a potter shaping a pot out of clay.

How many of you remember playing with clay when you were kids? Or some other malleable substance like Play-Dough or even mud? These things have an infinite number of ways in which they can be shaped. You get your hands in there and feel the texture of the thing. And you work it and shape it and work it some more. And the next thing you know, you've got an object shaped of your own design, of your own creation, for your own purpose, whether that is a pot or a plate or even an animal.

And what's great about clay is that you can add things to it. You can take a small ball of that clay and roll it out and attach it to your main piece, and suddenly you have a cup with a handle. Or a teapot with a spout. Or an animal with legs. Or even a person with hands and feet and clothes and buttons and a smile. The number of things that you can make out of malleable clay is infinite in scope.

All of that comes to mind for me when I look at that bulletin art for today of the potter shaping that pot.

I can't help but think that this is a fitting image for this Rally Day as we begin another year of Christian Education here at Holy Cross. And at that point, the potter becomes central to what we are about. The potter in that context, of course, is God. It's God who would shape and mold US.

How would God shape and mold us? With precisely those good things that we have already started celebrating with the start of our new Education year. God would shape us with his Word. God would shape us with Bible study, and prayer, and worship, and song – all of which starts and ends with his Word.

God himself would get his hands into us, just like you did when you were kids getting your hands into that clay. God would get his hands into us and get the texture of us, get the feel of us. And then God would start molding and shaping and working us, just like clay, until he has shaped us into something of his own creation, something of his own design and purpose. And he would add things as we need adding to, until we are shaped and molded and fine tuned in God's design, for God's ultimate purpose.

But there's something critical here when you are describing this picture of God as the potter that you perhaps would not normally think of when you think about clay. Clay is inanimate. Clay has no say when it comes to its shaping. Clay is simply there to be worked and shaped by the potter however the potter wishes to work and shape it.

Which leads me to ask a question of you. Just how malleable are you when it comes to being shaped by God?

I suppose a case could be made that we come into this world already shaped – at least as far as cells and tissue and hands and feet and looks and features are concerned. And all of us as Christians would just as quickly give God the credit for being part of that shaping and molding process while we are in our mother's womb, just as the scriptures would (Ps.139:13).

But we would also acknowledge that in many ways we enter this world as something of a blank slate, yes? There is much to learn before we are ready to be independent human beings in this world. We spend years in school, from preschool through high school and then perhaps on to college or vocational school. And even then there is more to learn than formal education can teach us, is there not? Life itself has much to teach us.

And through all of that, we are learning and always being shaped by our learning and by our experience. Until when? Until when have we learned it all? When do we stop learning and being shaped by life around us? You all know that answer. We never stop learning. We never stop being shaped by life, the good and the bad of it.

In fact, most of us have already learned by early adulthood that just when you think you've got it all under your belt, life sends you another surprise, and there's yet one more thing that changes you, that shapes you.

And yet there is more to our shaping than just formal education and life – especially for us as Christians. We know that we walk this whole journey of life from birth to death with our God. And that same God who helped to form us in our mother's womb is there throughout our lives to shape and mold us into his own creation, his own design, for his own purpose. And that shaping never stops.

Except some of us may not be as malleable as the clay in that picture of the potter on our bulletin cover. Some of us DO decide that we have reached a point in life where we've had enough of the learning, we've had enough of the shaping, and we just aren't quite as malleable as we were once.

Can we truly decide that? Of course we can. It's called free will. God even gives that to us as a gift. It's part of being shaped in the image of God. We have free will just as God has free will. And our free will sometimes just decides we don't WANT to be shaped. We don't WANT to be worked. We don't WANT to be malleable.

It's at this point that God's Word comes to us as it does in our lessons for today in the form of a choice. As Moses spelled it out for the Israelites before they entered the Promised Land, so God spells it out for us as well as we stand on the threshold of our future.

"I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. 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. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, 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."

In many ways, Jesus lays out the same kind of choice in the gospel lesson.
 ""Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers

and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

Does Jesus literally mean that we should hate our own families in order to follow him? That we have to give up all our possessions, as he says in the last verse, in order to be malleable and shaped by God for discipleship?

I think both lessons say the same thing, and it is precisely where our Be Faithful list over there begins: Put God first. That’s where the commandments that Moses refers to begin also. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul, and have no other gods to stand ahead of him. Not family, not job, not possessions, says Jesus. Not even our own self-mindedness that would lead us to say on occasion, “I know what I know, and I’m not going to be anything else or think anything else.”

Against that kind of occasional un-malleability, God would get his hands into us with his Word – which we know to be true and life-giving, mind you. God would get his hands into us with his Word, and God would work us and shape us and work us some more and shape us some more. And God would get hold of those stubborn hard parts and mold them and massage them in his blessed hands until they are soft and malleable and shapeable again. Until we feel the “Ahhhhhhh” as we relax into God’s good hands.

Until we come to a point where we can pray as we did in the Prayer of the Day, “Direct us, O Lord God -- in all our doings -- with your continual help -- that in all our works, begun, continued, and ended in you, we may glorify your holy name.”

“Direct us.” Now that’s clay being clay. That’s true malleability. That’s a life ready to be shaped by God the potter. That’s a life ready to do God’s will according to God’s good purpose and by God’s design.

On this Rally Day, may that be the prayer on our lips, and may the love of God the potter be in our hearts. And let us all be ready to be shaped for God’s good purpose.