

It is good to be back with you, but I must warn you — or perhaps raise your hopes, I am not sure which — that one of the hand exercises they taught me before I left the hospital has pretty well confirmed that my problem with golf was in my left shoulder, so once I am cleared to play again, I am sure it will be only a matter of a month or two before I join the PGA Golf Tour — well, maybe the “Champions Tour” they used to call the “Seniors’ Tour,” but I am fairly certain my game will improve that much. . . he prays.

This is the survivor of a pair of ceramic mugs one of my daughters-in-law, Krista, gave me one year. It’s hand-made pottery, something I have been looking for in terms of chalice and plate for communion, for some time. I am not sure exactly how the handle is affixed, but I assume the wet clay of the handle is pressed onto the side after the vessel part has come off the potter’s wheel.

And I am obviously showing this because of the passage we read from the prophet Jeremiah, for good reason considered one of the major of the Old Testament prophets. There is a specific historical context for Jeremiah’s use of the potter and the wheel: Jeremiah’s belief — and indeed, the belief that informs what we call “history” in the Old Testament — Jeremiah’s belief that the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel more than 100 years earlier and the threat that during Jeremiah’s lifetime became reality of the Babylonians’ conquering the Southern Kingdom of Judah and its capital, Jerusalem, his belief that these were or would be God’s punishment for the unfaithfulness of the peoples and leaders of Israel and Judah. The message was not a totally negative one, for it basically attributed to God the power to change God’s mind, to decide not to punish, to decide to build up.

Jeremiah’s message, however, though elsewhere in the Bible taken into an individual context, was that what the potter was working on his wheel was the *nation*, the *people*, of Judah. I want to use Jeremiah’s metaphor of God as the potter, but ask us to put ourselves as individuals and ourselves, collectively, as Christ’s Church, into the image of the clay being molded by the potter, and to ask the questions:

*Are we willing to let God mold us? Or do we struggle to get off the wheel to ignore God's efforts?*

*When we call God "Lord," do we mean it, or do we mean, "O God giver of advice we can choose to accept or ignore"?*

Today's message is not quite what I had anticipated when I wrote for our newsletter about how we need our prayers more than God needs them, yet what I did suggest, that the moments in prayer when we are not "speaking" to God are important because that is when God might be speaking to us, I meant! Not that God says, literally, "Bob do this" or "Don't do that," yet that can indeed be the message God is sending when we engage in prayer, and my question is, *Are we willing to follow God's words, let the hands of the potter, mold us, or do we want to get off the wheel and not let God mold us to the will of God?*

That sounds very general, but let me try to expand. While it is fine that we join in our collect prayer of confession, during the thirty seconds I give for silent confession, do you think of anything that you do that you should not do or do differently? Do you desire better to follow God's direction? That is letting God speak to you. But I need to return to something I did for a few months and then abandoned, to provide time for silent prayer following the pastoral prayer, time when you can say with your minds the names of some for whom you have concern — and then perhaps, as a result of what is God's speaking, do something for that person, even if it is just a phone call. Let me use a personal example, a simple one, of how letting God speak in our prayers can direct us. In the "petition" portion of what I seek to be my daily prayer, I always name my aunts and uncles, the number of whom has shrunk dramatically these past several years, part of that shrinkage being the death of my birth-mother's sister, my Aunt Mary, who lived in Ohio, about three years back. But I name her widower, my Uncle Ross, and three weeks ago the prayer led me to call him for the first time in over a year. He is pretty much an academic, as I seek to be, so we have for years had stimulating conversations, and he responded with delight to my calling, I reached him on his cell phone, and he

informed me that he had remarried — and this is very common, — married a high school girl friend from his hometown in Nebraska. Not a big deal, but I hope you get my point: Prayer led me to act because God essentially said, “Don’t you think it’s about time you called?”

Prayers of confession can help us to change our ways by naming to ourselves what we know we should change, and praying for others can help us to be more loving — both of which depend on our staying on the wheel and allowing God to mold us through God’s talking to us.

In other words, I feel that through my prayers, God is still molding me on the potter’s wheel; I hope that I do not climb off.

And we as Christ’s Church must consider that God may be trying to reshape us into a vessel different from what we have been, a different vessel to pour out the love of God to people beyond our own numbers. The Sessions of our two churches are attempting to discern how God is trying to shape us, and one of the ways we believe he is seeking is through some form of mid-week activity in Anthem, an area essentially unserved by mainline Protestantism.

Pray not only that your leadership will seek to cling to the potter’s wheel, but that all of us will allow ourselves to be molded into the church that God would shape us to be.

For what is the scope of the “possessions” Jesus wants us to give up? Might I suggest he is not talking solely about physical or financial possessions, but things we cling to that keep us from following Him, whether it be bad habits or personal resentments or, well, closed minds and hearts as to how we best as individuals and as Christ’s Church might serve him. Being blunt, clinging to a specific hour of worship because of our post-worship dining habits might well fall within the definition of “possessions” we should shed.

Mold us, oh God, mold us as individuals who can perceive your will for us as individuals and grant us the strength to follow that will, and mold us as congregations into what you need to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to people who do not yet know you through Him.

Help us stay on the wheel.

In Jesus' name. Amen.