

**Sermon Year C Proper 18**  
**Jeremiah 18.1-11 or Deuteronomy 30.15-20; Psalm 139.1-5, 12-17 or Psalm 1;**  
**Philemon 1-21; Luke 14-25-33**  
**Hating your mother, father, brother; giving up everything**

Considering the prophecy of Jeremiah this morning, much of this sermon is written with his message in mind.

While we read Deuteronomy this morning, I am going to read a few verses from the alternative reading: Jeremiah. (Honestly, when I went into my files regarding this Sunday's sermon, I realized that I had much more to say about Jeremiah than Deuteronomy. As I continue you'll know why.

Jeremiah tells us that he was told by God to “go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” So he did and found the potter working at his wheel. The wheel vessel he was making was spoiled and thus he reworked it into another vessel. God said to Jeremiah, “Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.... 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.”#

In Virginia, I had a couple of clay pots on the walkway up to my front door. They were cracked.

I have learned that once a pot is cracked or broken, it is virtually impossible to piece it back together the same way. Yet, being a Scotswoman, I refused to throw these pots away when I came home and found them in several pieces after a storm one day. They were rather expensive and I simply refused. So I “recycled”. I glued them back together as best I could, giving them a rather odd new shape and maybe a new purpose. At first funny weeds grew through the cracks but then I noticed that these funny weeds had beautiful tiny white flowers on them. Ah, God’s timing!

Along the same line, I know we’ve all heard the phrase “crackpots” (not alluding to those who use crack cocaine) but those people we might presume are out there on the edge somewhere. I would like to suggest a new meaning to that name today.

Let me begin by telling you a story:

An elderly Chinese woman had two large pots, each hung on the ends of a pole which she carried across her neck. One of the pots had a

crack in it while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water. At the end of the long walks from the stream to the house, the cracked pot arrived only half full.

For a full two years this went on daily, with the woman bringing home only one and a half pots of water. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments.

But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it could only do half of what it had been made to do.

After two years of what it perceived to be bitter failure, it spoke to the woman one day by the stream. 'I am ashamed of myself, because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your house.'

This story to be continued ...

In the meantime, let us examine our scripture for this morning. Once again, Jesus' words are harsh. (This is a difficult season in which to preach, because it calls on clergy to preach prophetic messages ... not necessarily "feel good" messages.) Yet, the end result is good news if we take these scriptures to heart and live into them.

Very carefully, today's readings are crafted for us to remember who and whose we are; who made us, as a potter fashions clay (Jeremiah 18:1-11); the fact that God has sought us and found us for which we are to be grateful (Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17); a reminder from Paul as to what it means to be a good Christian (Philemon 1-21) ... and strict "marching" orders from Jesus (Luke 14:25-33).

- Hate father and mother
- Hate life itself
- Carry the cross
- Give up all your possessions

Now my former Sewanee professor of Hebrew and the Old Testament, Dr. Rebecca Abts Wright, refers to these admonitions as "oriental hyperbole". Now for THAT I had to search the web! In what appears to be a sermon from [www.christfoundation.com](http://www.christfoundation.com) it means "speaking in the vernacular of the people, while at the same time, making an exaggerated statement in order to evoke an emotional response. Of course," the site continued, "Jesus knew that it was

impossible, but he also knew that in making this reference, his listeners would know, exactly what he was talking about, and respond accordingly.”

Dr. Wright continued in her elaboration of this gospel, “No one can accuse Jesus of using bait-and-switch tactics with potential followers. He is totally clear that no halfway measures will be sufficient for potential followers.”

With that in mind, however, let us go back to Jesus’ time and sort out some meanings. What we refer to as “love” today, is, in Hebrew, *ahab*. This means, rather than “love” as an emotion, it is a willful and intentional act of loyalty. Now, on the other end of the spectrum we understand that the English word “hate” is from the Greek word *mesei*. In Greek, this word can also be translated as “disregard” or “be indifferent to”. Hence, love’s opposite, “hate”, would be thought of as a lesser loyalty. In other words, all else becomes of lesser value than following Jesus as he leads us to God.

Another point of historical and cultural understanding would be that, in Jesus’ day, family membership was the core of one’s being.

Everything depended upon family. There was no such thing as branching out and becoming independent from one's family. In Jesus' day, one would ask who's is he or she? In other words, to what family does he or she belong? After all, women and children were considered property in those days, along with slaves and livestock. So, family identity was a key to existence, physically and economically. (My Scottish descent identifies me as a MacDonald and can be identified by the clan tartan I wear. If you are Irish, you can be identified by the cable knit pattern of your sweater.)

So, basically, what Jesus is saying is that they (and we) need to return to God through following Jesus first with everything else becoming of lesser importance. That includes family and things. We must pledge our allegiance to Jesus and to the God whom he represents.

Now, let us return to the story of the poor cracked pot.

The old woman smiled [and said], 'Did you notice that there are flowers on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your flaw, so I planted flower seeds

on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back, you water them.'

For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate the table. Without you being just the way you are, there would not be this beauty to grace the house.'

The story goes on "Each of us has our own unique flaw. But it's the cracks and flaws we each have that make our lives together so very interesting and rewarding. You've just got to take each person for what they are and look for the good in them."#

To which I would like to add, it is within these cracks that God is able to work ... If we are held together perfectly there is no room for God to further create in us that for which he intends for us to be. It is through those cracks that we can find him while he waits patiently for us. So, let us turn to Jesus and thank him for the human flaws that afford us an opportunity to open up and let him begin to work in us. Let us consider our flaws, turn them over to Jesus, and use them as opportunities for growth and new meaning through new relationship with him.

Let us pray:

Merciful God, as a potter fashions a vessel from humble clay, you form us into a new creation. Shape us, day by day, through the cross of Christ your Son, until we pray as continually as we breathe and all our acts are prayer, through Jesus Christ and in the mystery of the Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.

The happiest people don't have the best of everything; they just make the best of everything they have.