

Little Things – Big Things

Based on Jeremiah 18:1-11

Aspen Community UMC

September 9, 2007

Page 1 of 7

Jeremiah and the potter's house – you may have heard this one.

You may remember Jeremiah's call back in the first chapter of Jeremiah.

“Now the word of the Lord came to me: ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you and before you were born I consecrated you. I appointed you my prophet to the nations.’

Then I said, “Ah, Lord, God, I do not know how to speak,
for I am only a youth.” But the Lord said to me,

“Do not say I am only a youth, for to all to whom I send you
you will go and whatever I command you, you will speak.

Do not be afraid for I am with you to deliver you.

Then the Lord put forth his hand and touched my mouth...”

And now, Jeremiah, the prophet,

is asked to go down to the potter's house.

Historically, the context is the rising threat of Babylon – Babylon is looming
and Babylon and its leader Nebuchadnezzar will take Jerusalem in about 30 years - 597.

The northern kingdom has already fallen.

Reforms were happening under King Josiah but it was not enough
to prevent a course of events already in progress.

And Jeremiah was telling of this impending fall of Jerusalem.

People thought Jerusalem would always be safe from decline, safe from destruction.

Let's go back to the text now.

Jeremiah is told to go down to the potter's house.

And of course, the vision is about God and Israel – God's dealings with Israel.

And it ends with the metaphor in verse 6, “just like the clay...so are you...”

The big and the small –

Israel is huge for Jeremiah

And the vessel on the potter's wheel – is very small

and they are both what this reading is about.

Little Things – Big Things

Based on Jeremiah 18:1-11

Aspen Community UMC

September 9, 2007

Page 2 of 7

The first part is about God and God's role as the potter
who shapes and forms as God chooses.

The second part shifts to a series of conditional clauses
that outline possible courses of action by God in response to what the people do,
or, in the collective sense, what Israel does.

Jeremiah is not doing anything special here.

He is just watching someone spinning the wheel and shaping a vessel, and reshaping it.

This was an ordinary life experience,
and that ordinary life experience becomes an important theological reflection.

A piece of pottery was a small piece of everyday experience,
so was the action of a potter shaping clay,
to make a common object that was familiar to everyone.

Observing the clay becomes a metaphor for Jeremiah to talk about
God and God's work in the world.

Again, big things and little things.

Big things are reflected in little things,
and little things help us understand big things.

Jeremiah was writing about Israel,

It had some big challenges.

Israel needed to be more faithful to its roots.

Israel needed to respond to its challenges in more faithful ways.

Jeremiah was saying to Israel,

“If you keep doing what you are doing, you will keep getting what you are getting.”

We could apply the same to us.

We have challenges to our nation.

Some of our challenges to the safety and security of our nation
are different – but we do have them.

I was listening to some Presidential candidate hopefuls last week.

Little Things – Big Things

Based on Jeremiah 18:1-11

Aspen Community UMC

September 9, 2007

Page 3 of 7

Was there some Jeremiah in their words? Yes

They were dealing with the big picture and giving us their best guesses based on their experiences, their knowledge, and their sense of calling.

They all want to preserve this nation and lead it forward
and I believe call out the best in others.

They were dealing with the big picture, as was Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was addressing the big picture by addressing a small picture.

God is the potter and Israel the clay.

And again, the big and the small – “just like the clay...so are you.”

But, then...

The potter can shape the clay, and in the shaping something goes wrong, or the integrity of the pot is damaged, the potter throws off a piece or two, or adds more, and reshapes it.

Or perhaps the potter mashes it all back together and starts over. Sometimes when the clay becomes too rigid, the potter must toss it aside and start over with new clay.

There is the metaphor.

Can you think of times in your own life when you think that happened -
(staying with the metaphor) – to you, with you?

This is about Israel’s relationship with God.

This is a living and dynamic relationship between the potter and the clay. Some have interpreted this reading in Jeremiah to be about God as coercive, about god as all powerful – immutable - unchanging.

But that is not what is here in Jeremiah.

This is about an active relationship between two –
each adjusting to the other as it unfolds.

Little Things – Big Things

Based on Jeremiah 18:1-11

Aspen Community UMC

September 9, 2007

Page 4 of 7

This is also about spiritual formation.

Spiritual formation is the shaping of our minds and hearts
toward alignment with the divine – at least to the best we can see or discern.

Anytime we think we have it mastered it,
we usually fall off the wheel.

There is no room for arrogance in spiritual formation.

When we think we know it all – is when we become rigid -
and like the pot – are no longer pliable.

Israel did not want to listen to Jeremiah. They had all the answers.
Jeremiah's message was one that called people to change their ways.

Now, had Israel listened and been open to shaping,
would they not have been conquered?

We don't know.

What we do know is that Israel kept doing what they were doing,
and kept getting what they were getting.

That is the big of it – and the small of it.

Even the universe is giving us knowledge of the big and small as being similar.

For the workings of the solar system appear to be much like the workings of
those smallest things we know – the atom

with its spinning nucleus, its spinning proton and electrons.

And its spinning sets it on a course.

So it is with big things and little things.

So it is with us – so it is with our lives and our church.

Which brings us to what is most important today -
What does Jeremiah have to say to you and me and the
Aspen Community United Methodist Church?

Little Things – Big Things

Based on Jeremiah 18:1-11

Aspen Community UMC

September 9, 2007

Page 5 of 7

Some of you will be able to answer that much better than I because I am still new.

But, let me give it a try. Would that be all right?

Jeremiah brings an ancient metaphor. What can we learn down at the potter's house?

Big lesson – that we are a part of a much bigger picture -
bigger universe – God – a divine will (all terms I use for God)
a divine will that is always inviting us
to be more than we seem to be.

To stay with the metaphor - more than a lump of clay.

I don't like to think of myself as a lump of clay, how about you?

But, I don't mind thinking of myself as a vessel
being shaped by divine hands.

Is that better, a better image to work with?

Would you think about your life, about times in your life
when you and the potter are spinning along,
you and the sculptor are busy at the wheel
and something had to be reworked? Anyone been there?

If you have not been there, this chapter from Jeremiah won't mean anything to you.

So, see if you can connect with Jeremiah.

Jeremiah is talking about God and Israel – big things.

and he is talking about pottery – little things.

But big things are also little things, and little things are also big things.

And it is like the popular principle:

The way you do anything is the way you do everything.

Has there been a time when you were ever stuck in a mindset,
or stuck in an attitude (like not wanting to forgive someone or let something go)
that keeps your life from flowing in that loving pattern that you think might be there?

Perhaps like when a piece of clay

Little Things – Big Things

Based on Jeremiah 18:1-11

Aspen Community UMC

September 9, 2007

Page 6 of 7

is the process of becoming a beautiful piece of pottery, a vessel
gets too stiff to work with -
and the potter has to cast it off and pick up a softer, more pliable, piece of clay.
It may be a little metaphor, but it offers some big meaning for me,
and I hope for you.

And finally, thinking of the potter – the clay –
of all the different designs of pottery you have seen – or you have in your homes -
and how if they are hand made – not one is alike.
What a reminder of those around us– and the diverse and varied skills
that the potter is sculpting into us.

And that, I believe, is the church.
What might the potter be trying to create here in this church?
There are some exciting things going on. We need
the insight, the gifts and skills, of the many vessels
(and you and I are the vessels)
to help see what the potter sees that we don't see.
And we do that in prayer and study, and conversation about our lives.

This town came about because of a vision, a vision for a place for a full and balanced life -
where people could enjoy health, recreation and also art, music and education.

So much of that is here. They succeeded.

But I also thought of Jeremiah when I read a statement by Elizabeth Paepcke,
that she made in 1987 about her beloved community of Aspen
that she and Walter brought much of their life's work to.
With regard to the over development, mega-development
that priced people out of their own community, compromising
the vision and its attainment, she said:

Little Things – Big Things

Based on Jeremiah 18:1-11

Aspen Community UMC

September 9, 2007

Page 7 of 7

Are we going to kill the golden goose by feeding the animal until
its liver becomes distended
and we produce a pate which is so rich
that none of us can digest it anymore? What price glory?
She told a reporter that Aspen had “become a town of glitz and glamour...
a nut without a kernel.” ”My heart,” she said, “is broken.”

Can you see why I thought of Jeremiah?
And why I take the opportunity to ask:
What vision has the potter for us now?
And, what will we do to realize it, and help create it?
Do you want to be part of that visioning?
I invite us to live into that together.
I invite you to live it for yourself, and for us as a church.
And I invite you to live into a new vision with the help of someone like Jeremiah.
He had to be courageous. He had to be faithful. He had to love those to whom he spoke.
As I know we love this church and this community.
Are we that courageous? Are we that faithful? Do we love one another?
Take this metaphor home with you – let it spin on the potter’s wheel.
Remember the deep compassion of the potter,
and the capability of the clay – of you - to become a beautiful creation.
Let it work on your life and your faith.