



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THOU ART THE POTTER”

Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 18:1-11; Ephesians 1:3-14

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, June 2, 2019
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Ephesians 1:3-14

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

Have you ever met someone who told you right away that they were habitually late, or maybe that they were incessantly sarcastic, or perhaps that they had a tendency to interrupt conversations? Of course, not only were they telling you that they were a rude individual, what they were essentially saying was this: “You’re gonna have to forgive me ahead of time. That’s just the way I am.” No effort to change is apparent, and no effort to become a better person is remotely implied. We are simply faced with having to engage that person just the way they are.

When I meet with couples for pre-marital counseling, we inevitably spend some time talking about change. Now granted, no one's DNA magically changes the minute they say "I do" -- and so a husband or a wife to-be really do need to love their future spouse for who they are; but, by the same token, it is really no surprise that a marriage doesn't prove much success when one person unashamedly says to the other: "You knew what you were getting into. This is just the way I am!"

Tell me, what if we said that to God? What if the Apostle Paul, when faced with the grandeur of the risen Christ, on that Damascus Road had said: "Jesus, I appreciate your call on my life, and I am genuinely humbled that you set me apart long before I could respond in faith, but a complete transformation of my life and a mission to the Gentiles on top of that...Lord, I'm just not feeling it."

Or what if John Newton, the author who penned our opening hymn as well as his other classic, "Amazing Grace" – what if, upon perceiving that the Lord had come from on high and delivered him out of the deep waters, what if Newton had chosen to say: "But God, this slave trader business is actually quite promising...and I've got so many connections. Maybe I could just reform the industry a bit? You know, make a difference from the inside out."

But that is not at all how Paul or Newton responded, is it? In the case of the Apostle Paul, we are told in Acts that after he had regained his sight, "he got up and was baptized, and, for several days, he was with the disciples in Damascus, where he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.'"

And in the case of John Newton, what we hear him say is this: "I am not what I might be, I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I wish to be, I am not what I hope to be. But I thank God I am not what I once was, and I can say with the great apostle [Paul], 'By the grace of God, I am what I am.'"

And who was Newton? Well, by his own admission, we can tell that he was hardly the picture of spiritual maturity. He was not perfect in any sense of the word, and neither are we! In fact, we could rightly say that we are continually in a state of becoming the kind of people that God would have us to be, which is also to say that God is active and at work in your life and in mine...many times even before we know it.

In his letter to the church in Galatia, Paul acknowledges that God set him apart from before he was born, and that eventually God called him through grace; and in his letter to the saints in Ephesus, which we read this morning, Paul declares that we too are "[chosen] in Christ before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless before him in love."

Is it not amazing to realize that not only have we received an eternal inheritance in Jesus Christ our Lord, but that we also have the capacity to live for the praise of God's glory right now – to strive to be holy and blameless before him in love! But that's just it. You see, we don't always strive to do that! I dare say if we are to grow in wisdom and stature and into the fullness that God intends, if we are to move to a deeper level of Christian maturity, if we are to proclaim with integrity that "Jesus is the Son of God," then we will have to be willing to change.

Too often these days we confuse the joy that comes from knowing Jesus meets us where we are, with the off-brand theology which suggests that we can somehow remain as we are. Ah, but is it not the case that as God's love becomes operative in our lives, we become increasingly aware of just how much we fall short of its standard.

In the coming days, the students and friends of our church family, along with their advisors, will head out to Montreat and Maryville for the upcoming Senior and Junior High Youth Conferences. And while there, they will have the opportunity to further discern how God would have them to grow and change and better understand the heart and mind of Christ; and let there be no mistake about it, inasmuch as Christ's will is set forth in Scripture, it is to be obeyed.

What I'm getting at is this: Newton could not go on being a slave trader any more than Paul could continue persecuting Christians. Likewise, neither can we continue doing whatever it is that we do that is not God's best for us. You see, when it comes to God, a change on our part—not only is it necessary, but it also has a very important place in the fulfillment of God's purposes and the ushering forth of God's future. And I emphasize God's promises and God's future, because, while the future is undoubtedly shaped by who we are – our best and worst choices and everything in between – oh, our future is ultimately far more influenced and fashioned by God, than it is by us.

In today's Old Testament lesson, God tells the Prophet Jeremiah to go to the potter's house, and, upon his arrival, Jeremiah finds the potter diligently at work at his pottery wheel. Now, the word that is used for this wheel is used in such a way as to suggest that maybe two wheels were at work. The lower of the two wheels would have likely been regulated by the potter's feet and acted as a flywheel, while the upper wheel served as a platform, it allowed the potter to use both hands when shaping the vessel (cf. J. Brabban, p. 49 LH). And it's no mystery that God is the potter, actively and creatively working with clay like he works with people, and the children of God, well, we are the clay.

It seems that, as far as the Prophet Jeremiah is concerned, the purpose of the clay is to be formed and fashioned according to God's will. But notice that there is also something being said here about the quality of the clay itself. We may remember that at this time in Israel's history, the people of God are headed for destruction, and I doubt Jeremiah could have used a clearer image to make his points – that, first, when the clay spoils, it is reworked – and praise be to God for that! At the end of the day, however, if the clay is not conducive to the reworking of the potter, if it is not pliable and functional, then it will not be used at all.

The Rev. Anne Horton remembers as a child, watching her father, who was an art teacher, spend a great deal of time creating his own art. One of his great loves was pottery, anything from functional bowls and plates to colorful decorative pieces. She noted, however, that it was not just her father's skill and determination that made those beautiful pieces of art. Anne remembers that the consistency of the clay made a big difference as well. If the clay starter was mixed with too much water, it would slide around on the wheel, and if there wasn't enough moisture in the mixing process, the clay would begin to crack. In other words, the clay

had to be pliable and flexible enough to work with - in a word, it had to “cooperate” with the potter.

In our Jeremiah passage, we are reminded that while it is undoubtedly God who is that creator, there is also the divine expectation that we, ourselves, will be open to the transformation and renewal and change that God will bring about in our life. There is the expectation that we, like the clay, will cooperate with God. Unfortunately, cooperating was not something that Israel was very adept at doing. God wanted to mold and shape Israel into a strong community of faith, but their lives were spoiled by sin and they showed no signs of changing their ways, and oh how often we do the same thing saying to God with our lives and our living: “God, I just want to be up front with you from the get-go – I don’t put you first in my life. Oh, I’ll go to church from time to time, I might even put some money in the offering plate, but this idea of a whole life lived in joyful response for what Jesus Christ has done in my life and in the life of the world...God, I just want you to know that I can only go so far.”

Oh, friends, when we talk like that—when we think and live like that—we should not be surprised to learn that it will be virtually impossible for us to conform to God’s gracious will and intentions. Still there’s hope in the knowledge that even when the clay is hard to work with – even when it is spoiled, God never does give up on Israel...and God never gives up on us either.

In this way, Jeremiah’s is an altogether hopeful message because, even when we sin and fall short of the glory of God, God remains at the potter’s wheel, as it were...taking the ugliness of our lives and turning it into something with promise and beauty. And so it is, that we learn over and over again that our growth and renewal as the people of God, it involves change.

Arguably the greatest story of conversion in English literature is that of *Pilgrim’s Progress*. It is a story about a man named Christian who is on his way to the heavenly city. In order to get there, though he has to flee from the call of his family and friends so that he can find, as it is written: “Life, life, eternal life!” His trip is made through the kinds of perils and troubles that face us as pilgrims - suffering through such things as the Slough of Despond, Vanity Fair, Doubting Castle, and the Giant Despair, each of which, however, help to reshape him and to make him ready for the Celestial City (Gracia Grindal, p. 53 LH).

There is no doubt that each of us walk a little differently in the life that God has given us to live. We each have our own unique and personal journey of faith. We may start out by taking baby steps, for sure. We may even find at times, that like a child, we arch our backs, and squirm, or perhaps we become like dead weight in the hands of God. But know this, God in Jesus Christ our Lord, is always there to pick us up off of the ground and God continues to mold and shape us as the potter does with clay, until such a time as God’s influence and our willingness forms that most beautiful design, that very living witness to the handiwork of God– an instrument of grace. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.*