

Clay in the Potter's Hands –
Jeremiah 18

Howard Schultz, the former CEO of Starbucks and well-known billionaire, states that he is a "self-made man." The term "self-made man" was coined in 1832 by Senator Henry Clay and has been used and applied ever since to those who worked hard to accomplish success and money, rather than inheriting it or being given it. While hard work and success are always admirable, I think we do well to question the very concept of a self-made man or woman - can we ever be truly self-made? A humorist was once told about an individual described as self-made, and he responded, "...it relieved his Maker of a great responsibility." (1886 Shelley Society, p. 47) I think the prophet Jeremiah would have laughed at that given his description of who we are in today's lesson.

As we continue our series on Jeremiah today we find ourselves in this chapter right back where we started: with the concept of God as the potter, the shaper, while we are the clay in God's hands. We certainly have an important role to play in our own shaping, as the text demonstrates - we can either allow God to continue to work with us and shape us, like a partnership, or we can struggle against God and seek to go our own way. What is at stake is the question of our identity. Who are we? Whose are we? And what will we be?

The image from Jeremiah is an image that sees God, our Creator, as the potter who sits at the potter's wheel attempting to shape and sculpt us into the beautiful artwork we're meant to be - and we are partners with God in this task. There can be no self-made people according to Scripture. And we have been invited by Jeremiah to know ourselves - to know who we truly are - with identities rooted in God. This is important work - because many of us spend our lives either trying to figure out who we are, resisting who we are, doubting our call, losing our sense of identity, or simply embracing a mistaken identity. And this prevents us from living out God's purposes for our lives.

We want people to know who we are - because to know others and to be known is essential to us as humans, we who are built to be in relationship with others. And in order to be known - we have to know ourselves. If none of us are purely self-made, then the ultimate answer of our identity will always lie in the hands of the one who created us.

Who and what has shaped you? And how do we come to know and embrace our true selves?

After 4 years of seminary, my Dioceses required me to complete something called "Clinical Pastoral Education." This functions much like a residency, but requires would-be clergy to train in clinical environments, often involving crises, in order to develop their pastoral skills. I was assigned to a hospital in east Washington to serve as a chaplain. I had never been a hospital chaplain before, I didn't feel like I knew what I was doing, but I had received pastoral training and told I would be, among other things, the on-call chaplain in case of an emergency. The first time I was called in it was about 2am on a cold November night. Two teenage girls had been driving drunk and the roads had been icy. Tragically they had driven straight off a freeway overpass and thrown from the car. They were in critical condition and I was told that one of the girls was fighting for her life. I arrived before the family did and as I walked into the ER room and saw her - so badly injured and broken, I began to cry. I had never seen another human being so battered before. And she was so young and reminded of my younger sister and the reality and weight of her condition hit me so forcefully that I began to shake, and my crying turned to sobbing and then I began to hyper-ventilate. I left the room and went out into hallway where I continued to sob and hyper ventilate, unable to calm down. A nurse rushed up to me and said, "Honey, you don't seem okay - do you need the chaplain?" You can only imagine my embarrassment when I had to tell her, "I am the chaplain."

In that moment my identity as a chaplain, as someone who hoped to minister to others, was certainly questionable, if not impossible. I was in no position to be or act or serve in the role of a chaplain. Who was I if I couldn't be who I was supposed to be I wondered?

These moments can happen to us in our lives. We may know who we want to be or who we are supposed to be - but we, for whatever reason, are unable live into it, and our identity is shaken or even suddenly completely unknown to us. This can happen for many reasons but is always very distressing.

I left that hospital completely defeated - I was an utter failure as a chaplain. I questioned ever being able to be

in ministry – so shaken I was by that event. And it threw me into a crisis of identity.

But there was grace. Others came around me and supported me through it. They saw what I couldn't see then and assured me of my gifts. My clinical supervisors told me all was not lost - I had learned something, something important about myself, and this was an opportunity to grow and gain new skills to be. By grace, I didn't give up. I returned to that hospital and ministry and was mentored and supported through that training process by people God brought into my path. I prayed and asked God for help constantly- and for the grace to rely on God more fully the next time I found myself in that kind of a crisis. I was no self-made woman – I needed the love and support of a community of people and of God to reach the next step in my life- like we all do – to know myself and be who I was being shaped to be (and still am). Sometime later I was called suddenly to the hospital, and it was another terrible scene involving a young person, but this time, by grace, I was not only able to remain calm, I was steady enough to actually offer pastoral support. It reminded me who I really was, by God's grace and shaping.

Unlike a human potter that gets frustrated by mistakes and troubles with the clay and may even toss the clay aside, Jeremiah reveals that God never throws away the clay, even the most rebellious or flawed clay – God never gives up on us, but tirelessly returns again and again to the potter's wheel to shape us anew, each and every time. When we let the Creator meld us, we learn who we really are and we discover our true identities. You can be who you really are because God is who God is.

Thanks be to God.