

Visiting the Potter's Shed

Visiting the Potter's Shed. Have you ever visited a potter's shed? Seagrove, NC is known for the skill and beauty of the pottery produced by the artisans who have made that their home. Some of them hold open demonstrations in their workshops. Also when visiting Dollywood, you can watch both those who are potters at their wheels and those who are glass blowers at their craft. Both demonstrate amazing skills as they produce beautiful works of art for those watching. If you watch them long enough you will see this activity being played out. The potter's wheel and the hands guiding the clay will form a vessel rising up out of the clay as envisioned by the potter or suddenly the hands will move and the clay will sink back into just a lump because the potter does not like the form it has taken. The Hebrew text we have today draws this image for us, only as the potter is being watched God's message for Jeremiah and the people is overlaid on this image. This passage is taken from events recorded by the prophet Jeremiah, who call is complex...in addition to poetical and prose writings about the visions God gave him, Jeremiah's role was to demonstrate the message he was given...he was told to buy and bury a loincloth which when it was retrieved was ruined...becoming good for nothing as had the nation of Judah which the loincloth's deterioration demonstrated. (That passage is found in Chapter 13). Unlike much of the narrative found in Isaiah or Amos, our passage does not begin with Jeremiah receiving a vision needing interpretation. Instead we read: "The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord" gave him instructions on action he was to do. "Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So Jeremiah makes an actual visit to watch a potter at his wheel making a vessel from some malleable clay as he waits to hear God's message. As Jeremiah watches, whatever the potter was making did not turn out to be a vessel that was useable in the potter's eyes, so the potter took the malleable clay and reformed it into something else. God's message that he wants Jeremiah to take to the house of Israel is that God holds Israel in God's hands. The fate of the nation is in God's hands. Jeremiah is told there may be two outcomes as is possible for the clay that is shaped by the potter's hands...one outcome awaits the clay which has become what the potter desired, and another for the one which has not. God proclaims that as the potter God's intention toward nations can be seen in two ways...they can be built and planted or they can be subjected to disaster. Disaster waits for the nation that does evil in God's sight by not listening to God's voice, but if it turns away from the evil it is doing, the disaster can be avoided. At this point God has already declared the nation has been doing evil...naming two specific evils...forgetting who their God was and failing to live according to the commandments they had been given. In the last verse of the passage God states that currently the plan is against the people of Judah and Jerusalem, but the message also urges them to turn away from their evil ways and amend their ways and doings. The next verse after our official passage shows this to be beyond their ability. "But they say, 'It is no use! We will follow our own plans and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will.'" The question which has been placed before humanity as a whole and individuals is almost always an either or proposition in biblical terms. The alternative Hebrew Scripture for today came from Moses' final exhortation to the people on the verge of entering the Promised Land. In Deuteronomy 30:15-20 Moses tells them they have

a choice before them as they go into the land; the choice is between life and death. The choice is to be faithful to God who has claimed and covenanted with them or not. When framed that way, we assume the choice is obvious and we have made the correct one, unlike those inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. One Psalm for today, Psalm 1 opens the psalter with the same type of choice: do you walk in the counsel of the wicked or do you delight in the law of the Lord. Again, this framing makes the choice seem obvious. Yet if that is the case, why do we find our ears picking up and listening to the whispering voices of wickedness; and why is our attitude toward the “law of the Lord” not actually characterized as “delight.” Visiting the potter’s shed shows God as wanting to work with us to mold us into the shape envisioned at creation; a companion in intimate relationship and community with God and others; we even find God committed to a re-design when the molding did not go as planned. This passage shows that God’s plans for humanity are not yet fixed, that clay has not yet been fired but re-worked because God’s plans are not made apart from our own choices. Although the people Jeremiah spoke to and about were not receptive to God’s plan to transform them God is still the potter who desires to shape us. As we turn to the passage from Luke’s gospel we encounter Jesus speaking not to just his selected disciples, but to large crowds that have taken to following him. So far Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem has attracted these crowds who witness his healing, his feeding them, his speaking with authority about God’s reign...all very attractive and appealing things...they are following because of the blessings and wonderful things that he has associated with the kingdom. The crowd has not yet envisioned any liabilities. In today’s passage Jesus begins to explain that discipleship—following him—may have some drawbacks. Jesus’ words to the crowds about hating family and life and carrying the cross sound harsh to our ears; these requirements lift up the truth that following Jesus is a choice which has to be more important than all these things and requires a single-mindedness that those in the crowd may not have yet understood. Jesus is a radical teacher. The things he taught were radical then and still are today. Detrick Bonhoeffer’s book *The Cost of Discipleship*, although based on the Matthew text makes it clear that there are two things involved with Christian discipleship. The first is God’s free gift of grace...but that gift brings with it a call to place oneself in the hands of the potter...to be molded and transformed into a citizen of God’s kingdom, not of this world. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ requires living as that citizen of God’s realm; this is not about actions taken to “earn” the salvation God offers. That is a gift. It is about the choices that are made after having realized that you have been given the gift; grace that you have been offered the chance to be in a close relationship with your Creator and Savior which will transform your life in the present. Jesus’ words shows that to be his disciple one must be willing to champion the cause of the poor and dis-eased; to view one’s calling as more expansive than the confines of Temple or church; to sometimes buck traditions—and those who view those traditions as infallible; to live a life of relative poverty, unwilling to take bribes and to amass wealth on the backs of the oppressed and unaware; to struggle for the alleviation of poverty and a living wage for all at the expense of one’s own privilege, and to expand one’s conception of “family” to include neighbors near and far. Carrying the cross is a daily commitment and struggle; a commitment that must be renewed every day when confronted with the temptation to lay it down and live like the rest of the “world” concerned only with self and self-interest. Jesus asks

the crowd to count the cost of following him and his teachings just as they would count the cost of building a tower. The one who fails to count the cost cannot complete the building project and will then suffer ridicule for his incompetency and shortsightedness. To be a disciple one must not allow what it seems most Christians today do—most experience a disconnect between what we do on Sunday and what we do the rest of the week. That is, very few find something in what we say in the sermon, what we do during worship, what they hear in scripture and what they are doing that actually helps them make sense of their lives in the world. Somehow we rarely intentionally nurture our imaginations to believe that God is at work in us and through us for the sake of the world God so loves. If we can see this, then we can't figure out how our faith is making a difference in the things we are doing, and thus making a difference in the world. Somewhere along the line we have been trained to think that when Jesus talks about "taking up the cross" he is referring to some major spiritual travail. Or at least significant suffering or sacrifice, preferably on behalf of the faith. But it could easily be simpler than that. It could be more about the ordinary and everyday choices we make that are based on our discipleship—our being transformed and molded by the Sovereign Potter. The theologian Alan Culpepper says it this way: "The language of the cross bearing has been corrupted by overuse. Bearing a cross has nothing to do with chronic illness, painful physical conditions or trying family relationships. It is instead what we do voluntarily as a consequence of our commitment to Jesus Christ." If that is true, then we are invited to take up our cross—that is, have our life shaped by our commitment to the crucified messiah—anywhere, anytime, anyplace, and doing just about anything. Anyone offering their time, talent, and labor to God are bearing their crosses by allowing the whole of their lives to be shaped by their commitment to Christ. This cross bearing isn't about eternal destiny. This is about the character of our Christian lives. Christianity is a way of being, a way of living, a way of doing things differently because of living "in Christ" to use the Apostle Paul's favorite phrase. Much of the time we act as if Christianity was a way of thinking...and our thinking...our theology about what we believe does have an important role. But perhaps we need to focus less on what we believe and more on what we can and should do because we are called to do it...to live as Christ taught...to be filled with Christ's teachings and spirit in all we say and do. Perhaps we should visit the potter's shed more often seeking to be molded into the "new creation" that living in Christ can bring; maybe we would learn that carrying our cross is a choice, a choice made for life.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.