

The Potter Is Working

Jeremiah 18: 1-12 Philemon 8-21

Only a few of you took advantage of watching what I think we might all agree was the best of the *Star Wars* movies last Thursday. This most recent episode, released in December of last year, features some new main characters and returns a couple of the old favorites from the 1980s episodes.

What becomes apparent in these various characters is how they are all in some state of brokenness, divorced from their true purpose and promise, trying to find reconciliation and wholeness, trying to put their lives back on track.

The first new lead character to appear is a young black man who is a soldier in the army of the evil First Order, successor to the evil Empire. He has been trained in killing and brutality, but when faced with acting on his training, he fails. He is appalled at an order to massacre innocent civilians and doesn't comply. He awakens to realize that his life and purpose are corrupt and that his only hope is to escape and begin a new life.

The second new lead character is a young woman who is barely scraping out an existence as a scavenger on a junkyard planet. She dreams of a different life, one of adventure and exploration, characterized by an old fighter pilot's helmet that she puts on in a quiet moment alone as she indulges her fantasy. But she is held back by an expectation sustained for years that her family will someday return to her at this wasteland planet. Then she imagines that she will be made whole and can proceed with life as it should be.

The third lead character is a young man who is the son of Han Solo and Princess Leia. He is born with the gift of "the Force," an ability to utilize the power that permeates all life. Of course, the Force can be used for good, or it can be used for evil. Tempted by the promises of the Dark Side, he casts aside his born identity and becomes Kylo Ren, an evil apprentice to Snoke, the ghastly master of the Dark Side. Yet Kylo Ren admits to struggles with the light, with the good side of the Force, unable to fully give himself to the Dark Side. His brokenness lets the audience wonder if he can be reformed and converted – saved – from his Dark path to a way of goodness.

There are more stories of characters and, well, robots, all of whom are disconnected from their life's purpose, off track on their journey, and floundering in their attempt to re-discover meaning, purpose, and promise. But the story continues. We see them coming together to find a new direction that will lead each of them on a forward course, in pursuit of new horizons and discoveries about their lives.

This kind of adventure saga, and its quest for the truth of one's life, and the discovery of an authentic self and spirituality is a universal theme. It reflects the common human struggle to find meaning and purpose amid the many conflicting forces that come into one's life.

What it is **not** is a finished product. *Star Wars* can continue as an unfolding story for generation after generation because it is so primary, revealing archetypes for understanding the human condition and common life. Each generation must engage the struggle anew, or be carried along passively by unseen forces that control futures and empty the individual life of identity, integrity, authenticity, and intensity. The Pablum life is a bland survival, being tossed about on the currents and waves of time and events rather than facing the challenges and advancing on the quest.

Ultimately, it's a spiritual journey. It's confronting fears, doubts, and anxieties. It is about having personal faith, determination, and courage to ascend to the mountaintop, to slay the dragon, to cross the stormy seas, to face down the demons, and then claim the golden fleece, discover the holy grail, decipher the ancient code, and enter the Promised Land as **the** promise, **your** promise, gets fulfilled.

Throughout the journey and quest, the faithful need reminding that God is the Creator whose work of creation is always producing new things, new directions, new opportunities, and new life. It is the image of the potter at his wheel that gets invoked by the prophet Jeremiah in today's readings.

In this imagery, the prophet calls attention to the potter's craft to shape, re-shape, mold, form, and re-form the same lump of clay. It shows God's infinite creativity, the range of infinite possibilities, opportunities, and blessings. The potter works on the object of his attention to form it to suit the potter's purposes, to fulfill the potter's goals.

The first pot formed out of the clay was marred and would not suit the desired function. So the potter simply formed it anew into another pot, "shaping it as it seemed best to him." God is doing this all the time in people's lives.

But Jeremiah isn't so much interested in individual lives since his message, his prophecy, from God is addressed to the whole nation, to all the faithful in God's covenant people. *'O house of Israel, can I not do with you, just as this potter has done?' says the Lord. Like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.*

What follows is a pair of if/but/then clauses. In short, *if* the people of a nation are to be punished, *but* they hearken to a warning and repent, *then* God will relent and not inflict the planned disaster. *If* the people of a nation are to be blessed, *but* they engage in evil and disobedience, *then* God will reconsider the blessing.

These clauses indicate that God is **not** one who has set the course and made it irrevocable. Rather, God is in covenant with people of faith, a dynamic arrangement that expects certain things to happen as time and events unfold. The pair of if/but/then clauses shows the dynamism of the relationship, that expectations and plans can change when circumstances show that the foundational aspects of the relationship have shifted one way or another. When such shifts happen, God can shift God's plans.

The warning to God's people is not to presume that just because you are the people of God's covenant promise that you can neglect the covenant and still reap the blessing of that promise. In the same way, if God has determined a judgment and condemnation for what has occurred, but the people turn aside from that path and reform and return to the bounds of the covenant, then the condemnation may be abandoned as the covenant relationship finds healing all around.

As this selection closes, the reflection about different possible inputs and outcomes fades out. Now the terminology is present and urgent. This is the warning that God's people need to heed. *Turn now each of you from your evil ways, and reform your ways and your actions.* This is the opportunity to apply some corrective action, to give the potter a chance to gently place his hands on the form of clay and turn it on the spinning wheel into a shape that is pleasing and promising, that can become a blessing.

But Jeremiah knows the response of God's people, too. That is: *It's no use! We will follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will.* It's difficult to know exactly the sense from which this springs. Is it a statement that the requirements of the covenant are too difficult, too problematic? Is it a statement of value, that it isn't worth taking the path of the sacred and spiritual, of justice and righteousness? Or is it a statement about human nature, that there is a human unwillingness to change, a stubbornness that pursues self-interest above all else?

It seems that whatever the reasoning, God's people have decided that they are going to remain on their current course, even if it is a path of disobedience and resistance, of injustice and sinfulness toward God. Jeremiah warns them in this imagery of the potter and the clay that the potter is guided in his behavior in part by the responsiveness of the clay. If the clay resists complying and adapting itself to the purposes of the potter, if it cannot be shaped by the firm but gentle hands that seek to bring this object into its promise and blessing, then eventually the potter will cast it aside, abandoning it as useless. The promise that had been there will be much harder to recover, if ever.

Our other passage is from the short letter of Paul to Philemon. It's so short that it has no chapters, only 25 verses altogether. Yet it remains a deeply cherished letter because of the message of hope, expectation, and promise that it bears.

Paul could be a bit overbearing and intensely passionate, so he often found himself in jail. He usually had company, and the Lord's work of sharing the good news remained. Paul was an active evangelist inside jails and prisons in which he would often find himself. And the gospel found a ready audience among those who had been imprisoned. Although Paul doesn't say it, we might imagine that one of his cell buddies who came to profess faith in Jesus was apparently a runaway slave named Onesimus. Perhaps Onesimus had been caught and his owner had been contacted, not only for confirmation and instructions, but probably also for payment of a reward or finder's fee.

Paul has learned the story of Onesimus and realizes that he knows the owner of Onesimus quite well. This letter is an appeal to Philemon, the slave owner **and** the head of a new church somewhere.

Paul figures that his old friend Philemon owes him a favor. As a spiritual leader who could simply order him. Instead, he appeals to him as a brother in the Lord. He recounts the changes in Onesimus.

He begins by calling Onesimus his “son.” Onesimus became his “son” in Paul’s imprisonment, having come to faith in the Lord, the same Lord who had become Philemon’s savior, the same Lord whose grace brought salvation to Philemon.

Paul reflects how Onesimus once was “useless” to Philemon, having run away. Now he was useful to both of them, indeed sharing in the same grace of the Lord that brought new life to Philemon. (Although the word “grace” is never used in the letter, grace figures in it prominently nonetheless.)

Paul delves into the relational aspect, how the relationship has been changed by the potter who has reshaped the life of Onesimus, the same potter who reshaped the life of Philemon, and Paul for that matter. There is some debate about whether Paul actually suggests that Onesimus should be freed by Philemon, but certainly the idea is there. In verse 15, Paul writes: *Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for ever, **no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother**—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.*

Paul recognizes that God is doing new things in Onesimus, just as God did new things for Philemon. Paul wants to see his promise in the lord flourish. He doesn’t seem to want him to re-enter his old path in life. Free in the spirit of the Lord, let him be free in the flesh as well, would seem to be Paul’s sentiment. He trusts that Philemon will recognize what God has done and meet Paul’s expectations, and even more.

Our scriptures today remind us that God is the potter ever working on his creation, on each of us, that lump of clay on the wheel. God is always reshaping and reforming us in ways that will yield a blessing for us and for the advancement of God’s Kingdom. God is very patient, and God is always seeking to bring out the best, to bring to fruition that promise that we have in our lives. This working and re-working of our lives is God’s hand that brings forth in us new things, new promise, and new life.

In God’s handiwork, the changes brought about may feel like loss, may be painful, and may seem unkind, but each new form brings out something new and valuable. As we continue our journey, our quest for meaning and fulfillment, for identity and authenticity, for new life and reconciliation, may we remain committed in covenant with our loving and gracious God from whom all blessings flow.