

April 17, 2011

Jeremiah 18:1-6
Matthew 21:1-11

“The dog and cat test of Christianity”

When I was a child, my mother was definitely a “let me show you” kind of teacher. As she cooked, cleaned, worked in the garden, she spoke to me, pointing out each step in her tasks. Without realizing it, I learned a multitude of things. When my husband and I married, I was a nineteen year old college student. Gilles assumed I didn’t know much about housekeeping or cooking, since I was so young! I really surprised him with my knowledge and my “from scratch” home cooked meals!

We’re now deep into the book of the prophet Jeremiah, in our Grand Sweep of reading the entire Bible in one year. God’s interactions with Jeremiah were sometimes similar to the way my mother tried to teach me. In the text we heard this morning, God took Jeremiah to a potter’s house. Jeremiah and his nation needed to learn some painful truths. So God took the prophet to a place where God could say, “Let me show you,” as he tried to help Jeremiah understand what lay ahead.

As Jeremiah watched the potter, he saw shaping, breaking, reshaping, refining, as the clay became an object of value. God helped Jeremiah understand that the nation of Judah was in God’s hands, and would be shaped by God, even through painful events, such as the conquest of the nation by Babylon, and the subsequent exile of the people.

God shapes nations, communities, and also individuals. We don’t like the fact that this shaping is not always smooth and easy. It’s not predictable. It may include suffering and pain. We may need to learn hard lessons.

Today is Palm Sunday. We remember and celebrate Jesus, who rode into Jerusalem and was acclaimed by the people as a great king. Today we feel that same joy, but we, unlike the crowds long ago, know that suffering and pain are a part of this story, too—along with the joy.

Today is a great day to affirm Christ as our KING, the ruler of our hearts, the ruler of our wills, the source of all delight. Christ is One who knows us completely, and who experienced the tangled webs of human life and struggle.

Christ is One who has opened the door to forgiveness of and cleansing from our sins. (We need both.) He is One who offers balm and healing for our wounds. He is our Potter; he makes and shapes us into the person he calls us to be.

When Jeremiah watched the potter working, he saw that the potter had all the power over what the clay would become. Potters sometimes say it seems the clay has a mind of its own, but they know that in time it will be mastered by their will and skill. God was calling the nation of Judah to submit to God's will.

The shaping process requires submission. We are a special kind of clay as communities AND individuals. We have a mind and will- which are often rebellious. In order to become the people God calls us to be, we have to agree to let God shape us. And we'll have to reaffirm that willingness repeatedly as time goes by. The clay eventually hardens and the vessel is made and finished. But for people, the process never really ends; we need to yield, to place ourselves in God's hands, again and again throughout life.

Jesus, riding into Jerusalem, was yielded to God. He was willing; he knew where he was heading, yet he told God, "not my will, but yours." The shaping that he faced would include suffering. But he held to his course, and was faithful to the cross.

Today is Palm Sunday. It's also Passion Sunday. We know that Christ was to be the Savior of the world. His LOVE FOR US, kept him on that donkey. His LOVE FOR US took him to the Upper Room, to share a final meal with his friends. HIS LOVE FOR US sustained him as he prayed in anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane. There is a saying, "It wasn't the nails that held Christ to the cross; it was his love for you and me."

As Christ embraced God's will, he was made and shaped into the Savior of the World. We are called, like him, to embrace God's will, so that we, too, will be shaped into Christ's likeness.

How does this happen? A poem by George Herbert is helpful:

*Teach me, my God and King,
In all things THEE to see,
And what I do in anything,
To do it all as for thee.*

The Amish teach that one does canning and carving for the glory of God. There is an Amish community near our house in Portage, Wisconsin. They sell things they have canned and carved in some stores located in the heart of their farmland. Many of these items bear quotes from Scripture, naming the purpose of the makers as that of glorifying God.

Eileen Caddy has said, *When you take a dirty floor, scrub it and make it spotlessly clean, and then polish it until it shines, it radiates BACK TO YOU the love which you poured into it. The divinity of that floor has been drawn forth.*

Albert Schweitzer, doctor and missionary to the sick in Africa, was once asked to name the greatest person alive in the world at that moment. (Many would have named HIM.) His reply: *The greatest person alive in the world at this moment is some unknown individual in some obscure place who, at this hour, has gone in love to be with another person in need.*

To be shaped in the Potter's hand, we're to do ALL as if we're doing it for Christ. This is not a new idea, but it's pretty radical, really. If we REALLY manage it, we should be able to pass the "dog and cat test of Christianity, described by Hudson Taylor: *If your father and mother, your sister and brother, if the very CAT AND DOG IN THE HOUSE are NOT happier for your being a Christian, it is a question whether you really are.*

By your fruits you shall know them, we learn from Scripture. By our fruits we can see and know **ourselves**. Sometimes when we look closely at the fruit of our choices and actions, we are appalled. But that's not always a bad thing! For, when we see a need for change, we are more motivated to place ourselves in God's hands, to be molded and shaped.

M. D. Gerald Jampolsky, author of *Letting Go of Fear*, writes *Everything we think, say or do reacts on us like a boomerang. When we send out judgments in the form of criticism, fury or other attack thoughts, they come back to us. When we send out ... love, it comes back to us.*

As we move through this Holy Week, remember we do all "as for thee"—for Christ.

- Sign Christ's name to every check.
- Sign Christ's name to every credit card purchase.

- Speak each word into Christ's ear.
- Send each e-mail or text to Christ's address
- Call Jesus Christ on the phone.
- Call Jesus Christ to come to the table for dinner.
- Do your homework for Jesus to review before you hand it in.
- Wave to Jesus when you see him working at the side of the road.
- Hold the heavy door of the store, shop or church building open for Jesus, letting him go in ahead of you.
- Greet Jesus when you see him alone, feeling awkward.
- Laugh at Jesus' jokes even when they are lame.
- Cook or deliver a meal to Jesus over at Lazarus House.
- Send an offering so that Jesus can get some chicks to raise through the Heifer Project.
- Teach Jesus a Sunday School lesson
- Attend a committee meeting for Jesus
- Ask Jesus to go with you on your business trip. (He will.)
- Sing a lullaby and rock little cranky Jesus when he wakes at 2 a.m. with an ear ache.

And, this year, come to Holy Week worship on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights, at 7:30 in the evening. Come for Jesus.

God wants us to place ourselves, yielded and still, into his hands, to be shaped as the potter shaped the clay before Jeremiah. Will we do this?

I pray we will. Over and over again, actually! Amen.