

Pentecost 13 – C (2019)
Jeremiah 18:1-4 Psalm 139:1-18

Once upon a time there was a piece of a jigsaw puzzle. It did not know it was a piece of a jigsaw puzzle; it only knew that it was there where it was and it was pretty nice to be there. There were many other pieces which also knew little of themselves or their whereabouts. The pieces lived together, jumbled up in a big box. This first puzzle piece seemed to live quite well on its own. It ate its own food, drank its own drink, did its own work, and enjoyed its own peace. Seldom did the puzzle piece consider why it was different than all the other pieces. It rarely wondered, for example, why it ate and drank things that others would not try or why it felt quite comfortable next to some pieces and very uncomfortable next to others. These questions rarely came; they certainly did not affect how the puzzle piece lived its life.

One day, for some inexplicable reason, the first puzzle piece felt drawn, as if by a large magnet, to another piece. Maybe it was their common green color, maybe it was not. It only knew that the two fit perfectly together. It was as if it had been ordained to be that way from the beginning. When some other pieces saw that the two pieces had come together on their own, they also began to pair up – reds with reds, blues with blues, square pieces with square pieces. Some pieces could not find a proper fit; others did not want to try. Those, however, that did find a match felt more fulfilled.

A little later two pairs found that they could become one group of four. In a flurry of activity, two pieces became three, two pairs became a quartet, and two quartets an octet. In the midst of all the activity, the original puzzle piece yelled out, "Where will it all end?" The question stunned the pieces; all was quiet. No one had ever thought of this before. One piece offered an answer, a second another response. The way was not clear, the future was uncertain. Without clear vision the pieces began to separate and for the first time in their lives they felt loneliness. The confusion that had been caused was worse than their original state. Something had to be done; it was simply intolerable to live without an answer. Then all of a sudden, miraculously or mercifully, someone or something dropped a picture in front of them. All the pieces stopped and stared. "It is us," they all shouted in unison. "At last, we know exactly how we fit and where we go!" In the end all the pieces reunited, the puzzle was solved, the picture was completed, and everyone lived happily ever after.

The puzzle pieces were composed of all sizes, shapes, and colors. On the surface they did not seem to belong together at all, but once they realized that their unity and ability to complete the picture was up to them, they began to work as a team, in unison. but they needed some assistance from above, someone or something to show them the "big picture" and how they fit together.

We can't always see the "big picture" and don't always know what tomorrow will bring. When I came here to Waupun and the Waupun United Methodist Church, I knew that I didn't know what I didn't know. Since that time, in the last two months, I am beginning to learn what I don't know. This is a life-long process.

There is a psychological tool which I enjoy called the Johari Window. It is a square divided into four quadrants. In one quadrant, there are the things about us which we are aware of and which others know as well. In another quadrant are the things that others see

in us and know about us which we neither see nor know. A third quadrant is the secret section wherein lie the things that we know but others do not. The fourth is what I like to call the God-quadrant: that which God knows but no one else does – including us.

And that’s where our Psalm for today comes from. In Psalm 139, the writer suggests that God's knowledge of us is so intimate and so close that God ends up knowing us better than we do ourselves. That's often true. There's much of ourselves that we often don't want to face. But God will not let us get away with that. God has a knowledge and a hope and a desire for us which will come about if we are willing to be shaped and formed by God, because God presses in before and behind, and ultimately this knowledge is so wonderful that it becomes my salvation.

That type of close and intimate knowledge that others may have of us can make us uncomfortable. On two occasions since I got here, the computer in the Pastor’s Office has suddenly made horrendous noises and frozen up. On both occasions, the computer was hacked and shut itself down to prevent further encroachment. I had to call Microsoft support which was able to correct and repair the problem - at a cost. The technician was able to show me the addresses of the hackers and just how many had gained access to the Pastor’s computer – knowing all there was to know in the computer. There was nothing sensitive in the computer – yet – but having those fingers in the pot was scary.

I wasn’t in control of the situation and did not have the resources to see my way through. That happens in life as well. Situations come up and we don’t know where to turn and what to do and need someone to take over. Thank God, for people of faith, through all the stresses and strains of this very human life of ours, we remain always in the potter's hands. Although life may present itself at times as a random frenzy, a whirl of confusion, on either side of us are the practiced hands of the potter: the breaker and molder, the maker and unmaker, the creator of this world and of our very selves.

Sometimes it can feel like God is far away or distant, but what does Psalm 139 say about how well God knows each and every one of us? In verse 13 it says “you created my innermost being.” What does that mean to you? Even though we may not always feel wonderful, verse 14 says we are “wonderfully made.” How does this verse challenge us to think about ourselves?

God speaks through the prophet Jeremiah in chapter 18 and invites us to put our trust in the Master Potter:

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD:

² “Go down to the potter’s house, and there I will give you my message.”

³ So I went down to the potter’s house, and I saw him working at the wheel.

⁴ But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.

A potter uses her hands carefully and sensitively. It’s a delicate matter to shape a clay pot on a wheel. This is truly the work of an artist. A slight change in pressure—or a change of mind—can result in the pot becoming ruined. Nonetheless, the potter can still turn the clay into something else.

“Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done?” God tells Jeremiah. “Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. The vessel the potter was attempting to create got spoiled, so the potter reworked it into another vessel, “as it seemed good to him” (v. 18:4).

In the midst of life’s challenges and trials, those times when we cannot understand why things happen the way they happen, when we consider the brokenness of the world and the brokenness of the creatures, including us, who inhabit this world, Jeremiah offers words of hope and comfort: it isn’t all up to us, we have a God who knows us better than we know ourselves and is always at work recreating and reshaping us into the perfect pot that God knows we can be. When our lives get hacked, Divine Tech Support is ready and willing and able to come in and fix what is broken when we cannot because God knows us better than we know ourselves and knows just what we need when we need it.

Why does this memorable text grab our attention so forcefully? God is sovereign, and God has a destiny for us. Yet at the same time, we have the freedom to reject God’s will, as incredible as that may seem. There is a difference between God as potter and God as puppeteer. God forms us, but that doesn’t mean God pulls the strings. God doesn’t make us do certain things. We have the ability to say no, the cost is too high; I’m going my own way.

In this week's Old Testament passage (Jeremiah 18:1-11), the prophet Jeremiah offers a rich visual image – the potter working clay at his wheel. Therein is an apt remedy for the detours we take along the journey of the spiritual life. Like the clay, we must be centered on the wheel. We must be kept moist by the ongoing disciplines of prayer and worship. And we must subject ourselves to the pressure of the potter's hands, lovingly molding us into the form designed for us.

We are “wonderfully made.” If God thinks so, whose opinion could be more important? Our self-worth is grounded in God’s loving acceptance of us. For the psalmist, and for us, this is the truth that keeps us from constantly searching for quick fixes that prove to be illusory. It doesn’t matter how many face lifts we undergo or surgeries we endure or how much money we make or the promotions or awards or trophies that we receive, if we expect them to secure our sense of self-worth and acceptance, we’re going to be disappointed.

So just what is it that lifts our souls?

It could be that God knows us. Listen again to verses 1-3 from Psalm 139. God has “searched” us, God “knows” us, God is “acquainted with all my ways.”

It could be that our very life began with the breath of God: “For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb” (139:13). You are not an accident. You are not a mistake. There is a reason. Your life, your soul was inflated with the breath of God.

It could be that my body is a miracle! “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made,” says vs. 14. “Wonderful are your works; You know me very well” (139:14).

The first six verses tell us that God knows everything there is to know about us. While these verses may feel claustrophobic, the writer of the Psalm intends the reader to feel secure and protected. To know the LORD completely is too wonderful for anyone.

Verses 7 - 12 tell us that there is nowhere one can go to escape God's presence, fly to Heaven, the LORD is there; sleep down in Sheol, the LORD is there; fly to where the Sun rises, the LORD is there; go as far to the west as one can, the LORD is there also. Lots of familiar, beloved hymns make this same point: In Christ there is no east or west; there is no shadow of turning with thee; there is no place where earth sorrows are more felt than up in heaven; LORD how thy wonders are displayed where're I turn my eyes, if I survey the ground I tread or gaze upon the skies.

There is no place the psalmist can hide from God, nor would he want to, because "such knowledge is too wonderful" even to comprehend. God's presence with him at all times and in every circumstance, is enough to bring him a sense of inner security and comfort.

Isn't it enough for us, too? Resting securely on the "wonderful" knowledge of God's presence is the very truth that enables us to know that our changing physical appearance, which is a natural occurrence, has no effect on God's acceptance of us.

God is working with clay that God has given a say in the matter. The theological way of saying that is: God is working with clay that God has fashioned in the divine image; with clay that has been endowed with the ability to reveal God through words and actions of love and grace and compassion and justice – or to conceal God through actions that are the opposite (or at least the avoidance) of those same qualities.

Remember where you started from, says Jeremiah to Israel, and to us. Our origins trace all the ways of God's creation: A creation out of clay, but also a creation in the image of God. A creation that bestows upon us incredible possibility for good in this world. A creation that allows us incredible latitude for making a mess not just of our lives – but of those of our neighbors and the very earth itself.

We are free to choose whether we will allow ourselves to be shaped in ways that are for the good, or whether we will be misshaped by hatred, apathy, or evil into instruments of something other than the God who fashioned us and all for good. And this God is not afraid to stand against the things and the ones who would mar God's creation. God remains the potter. So, what will the clay do?

When it comes time to choose, just remember where you started from.

And still, God isn't finished with us yet. We are constantly be reshaped and reformed into the perfect creation that God has in mind for us. God has created and God is creating. While the ways of God are hidden from us, God knows us and knows our ways and thoughts in intimate detail. Nothing is hidden from God and, in spite of that or because of that, God loves us unconditionally. God keeps us and our needs and our very lives right before Him – always in relationship with Him.

We baptize Nora Beth today and bless backpacks today and, by extension, bless our children. But it doesn't stop there. We bless them and wish the best for them and do what we can to raise them in the ways of God and model for them the ways of God, but also do the same for each other. We are all – still – children of God and God continues to love us and form us into what God knows we are designed to become.