

**Throwing Clay**  
**The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC**  
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A potter's job, to an unfamiliar observer, looks simple enough.

You dig in the dirt, you pull clay out of the soil, you mix it with just enough water for it to be pliable, you shape it and mold it into usable everyday items like cups and bowls and other creations.

To the untrained eye... it might look just like someone playing with playdough.

Those who have practiced and honed their craft have a way of making their work look effortless. When you watch a potter at work, there is an ease and elegance to what they do.

They throw the clay on the wheel, and like magic, they push it one way and the clay responds. They move it another way and the clay moves too, exactly where they want.

Their hands and the clay work in tandem and then all of the sudden walls form, and flare out, and there before you is a beautiful, hand-crafted, piece of pottery.

The first time I sat down at a potter's wheel was at Silver Lake Conference Center, our church's camp in Sharon, CT.

Me and a handful of other 10-year-old campers watched our instructor go through all of the steps to make a bowl. She started by showing us how to slam it on the table to remove the bubbles, Then, she began to knead it, like bread dough. Then she sat at her wheel, and explained what she was about to do next, and how her hands would move to center the clay in the middle of the spinning wheel and then how she would hold her fingers to shape the walls of the bowl.

And then she started, her feet moving the pedals down below the wheel, turning it more rapidly which each press. In what seemed like less than 10 seconds, she formed her lump of clay into a bowl.

It was like magic.

Then it was our turn to have a go at it.

One camper forgot to through it first, and kneaded the clay in such a way that it added too many air bubbles... which would have caused the creation to explode in the kiln, so the instructor took her airy clay and put it in a bucket in the corner, and gave her some new material.

I was busy watching others, and kneaded my clay too long, so it dried out and became unworkable. She also took my clay, added it to the bucket, and gave me some new clay to work with.

When we finally got to the wheel and tried to center the clay, one camper pushed too hard and sent it flying off the wheel... right back into the corner bucket.

Another added way too much water, which sprayed a fine muddy mist onto anyone within a 5 foot radius. His creation was a sloppy mess, there was no ways the walls would ever hold up... you guessed it, that goopy clay went right back in the bucket.

Believe it or not... each camper left that first week with one small cup we had proudly finished on the wheel, after sending about ten pounds of a trial run back to the bucket.

At first glance, the whole process seemed wasteful.

Pounds and pounds of accidents and mistakes, there in the bucket. Pounds and pounds of well-meaning efforts, all of our trial and error... back in the bucket.

But the fascinating thing about clay, is that it never really goes to waste.

Messed up clay goes in the bucket, watery slushy clay goes in the bucket, dried out and cracked clay goes in the bucket... and over time, all of the clay settles to the bottom, and all of the water separates to top.

You can recover all of it. You can reconstitute it and reuse it again and again. There is nothing lost, no mistake so big that the clay can't be given a second chance.

Of course, that is, until it hits the kiln. The fire hardens the clay into ceramic, its chemical make-up changes and it becomes almost like stone, never again able to turn back into its original.

Once it has cooled from the fire, if ceramic breaks at this point, then it is truly broken. Maybe the shards can be used for a mosaic. But the potter can't ever reshape or mold it again.

That bucket of clay in the corner was the revelation Jeremiah made, back at the Potter's House, his message from God for his community.

Jeremiah was a prophet, and his job was to preach... to tell his community what God is saying in their contemporary context.

He is often referred to as the "weeping prophet" because so much of his ministry was spent lamenting the national, religious, and social chaos he saw around him.

Jeremiah's home country was falling to the Babylonian empire. His religious authorities were corrupt and preaching idolatry, and to top it all off, he was enduring his own personal struggle with deep questions of faith. The words he spoke often put him at odds against the leaders of his time, to the point that he regularly received death threats.

And right in the middle of all of that turmoil ... God called him to go and spend some time at a potter's studio. To watch an artisan at work and try to understand what God has to say.

The world may look like it is falling apart, our institutions may feel like they are broken, your life may be twisted up in doubt and confusion but it is all still clay, and God says...

*"Can't I do just as this potter does? You haven't been put in the fire yet, no, not really... can't I take this same clay and remake it?"*

It is easy sometimes to feel like we have arrived at our final form. Like God has already done all of the work of shaping and molding us... Like we've already been put through the fires and become hardened, and that any cracks or broken places found within might be permanent.

We might think God has finished all of the work of molding and shaping our communities, our society, our world, and we are stuck with it, because there is no hope that they will ever change.

I think this is an important message for our graduates today. Maybe not one that they will hear in the celebratory graduation speeches of their teachers and peers.

Because whether they are headed to their next academic institution, or venturing out on in a new career, they will encounter moments of trial, failure, and second chances.

And that is precisely the moment when it is crucial to remember what God has to say to all of us today...

God's creation is not yet ceramic, it is clay...

We haven't been put in the fire yet...

God is still at work, putting us back into the corner bucket.

God is like the master potter, able to whip up a bowl in seconds, able to shape and move the clay with effortless ease.

This clay may not yet be where it could be...

God is still molding us and remaking us...

Still working on us and our world,

turning the wheel and remaking the masterpiece with each new day.

So don't ever lose your hope.

God has brought us to the potter's house to see this vision for the world... God is still the potter... and we are still the clay...

And whenever we see brokenness or dried out cracks in ourselves or in people we encounter, God is still working there.

When we discover problems that feel insurmountable, or mistakes that seem irreparable... God is still molding and shaping that clay into a beautiful vessel.

Whenever you struggle to trust that God is making all things new... just remember that clay covered bucket, the one way back there in the corner. Amen.