

## *Sunday Sermon September 7, 2024*

Shaped and formed. Shaped and formed. Shaped and formed. That's the life of faith.

We hear it through the wonderful image of Potter God in today's first reading from Jeremiah. Shaping and forming the people, God's people, in God's strong, loving hands. Shaping and forming us.

I love James Weldon Johnson's beautiful poem entitled: "The Creation."

In the poem, God steps out into space, looks around and says: "I'm lonely, I'll make me a world."

And God smiled and broke the darkness with light.

And God rolled the light in God's hands and made the sun.

And God spat out the seven seas.

And God made the grass and the trees, fishes and fowls, beasts and birds.

And after each one, God said: "That's good!"

And then the poem reaches its climax. It says:

Then God walked around,

And God looked around

On all that God had made.

God looked at God's sun,

And God looked at the moon,

And God looked at the little stars;

God looked on God's world

With all its living things,

And God said: I'm lonely still.

Then God sat down –

On the side of a hill where God could think;

By a deep, wide river God sat down;

With head in hands,

God thought and thought,

Till God thought: I'll make me a man!

Up from the bed of the river  
God scooped the clay,  
And by the bank of the river  
God kneeled down;  
And there the great God Almighty  
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,  
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,  
Who rounded the earth in the middle of loving hands;  
This great God,  
Like a mammy bending over her baby,  
Kneeled down in the dust  
Toiling over a lump of clay  
Till God shaped it in God's own image;

Then into it God blew the breath of life,  
And man, and woman, became living souls.  
Amen. Amen. -James Weldon Johnson-

Shaped and Formed... Potter God shaped and formed man and woman – you and me - in God's own image, blew into us the breath of life. And it was perfect... until we sinned and turned our backs on God. For God had made us in God's own image, but God had made us free. Free to choose God's way of life and love, but also free to choose otherwise: to turn our backs, to harm, and to walk away from God and each other.

Any capable potter will tell you that shaping and forming a piece of art from a lump of clay is not easy. Potter Ashley Warner says: "Paint stays where you put it, but clay talks back." Clay talks back, like us. Sometimes the clay collapses and needs to be reworked, rebuilt, remade, and re-formed into something new. So too with us, followers of Jesus, who practice the Way of Love. We are often required to "Turn."

That word is used twice in the Jeremiah reading today. Turn – pause, listen and choose to follow Jesus. We are called to turn from the power of sin, which manifests itself in fear, and injustice, selfishness and division, toward the way of truth, and love, hope, justice and freedom.

This turning is not a once-in-a-lifetime event, but a continual process. Over and over again we choose to turn away from the things that harm ourselves and others and turn toward what gives life. And so, we are continually re-shaped and re-formed, like clay in the potter's hands.

In today's Gospel, Jesus presents a difficult teaching. Some scholars suggest the word "hate" is better translated "reject." But still, "reject" father and mother, wife and children? These words are sometimes interpreted as Jesus calling for a broader understanding of family, an understanding rooted in our common humanity.

This Gospel suggests that there can be times that following Jesus requires a turning away from people who were close to us. I have known people who were trying to live Jesus' Way of Love, trying to follow His call to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being, who had to turn away from people close to them, even family members, because of their racist, sexist, fundamentalist or homophobic views, or because of abusive words or actions, or their unwillingness to let go of their demeaning views.

My friend, Bishop Craig Loya, in reflecting on being a person of faith today says:

"When we lead with clarity and courage, not everyone will be happy about it, and not everyone will want to come along. The inclusive gospel of Jesus also draws clear lines about what God does and does not tolerate. It is our job to keep pointing clearly and unambiguously to what God promises, and to what God asks of us."

I believe what Jesus is suggesting is that we must be willing to renounce and turn away from anything that stands in the way of a full commitment to His Way of Love.

Praise God, praise the potter who shapes and forms us in God own image and who calls us to new life in Christ. Amen.