

The Imprint of the Potter's Fingers

September 9, 2007

Jeremiah 18:1 - 11 Psalm 139 Luke 14: 25 - 33

The family of three – two young parents and a little boy – sat in the booth across from us. By the frequency with which he said “No!” I guessed the little boy was two years old. It was fun to watch their interactions – two trips to the washroom, several times of catching the child climbing the back of the seating area and resettling him in his seat, much distracting him with the two little animal toys he had, and brief little conversations. Sitting as I was with my own daughter, now nineteen, but remembering those days, I wondered at the mystery of our humanness. What would this little boy look like a few years from now? What would he be interested in, curious about? And what would the mom and dad be like a few years from now? How would their lives continue to be shaped by this child, and by the events of their lives that no one could predict now? Sitting as I was, with Miriam, I thought about how my life has been shaped by knowing her.

I like to read a Saturday column in the Hamilton Spec. Jay Robb writes in the Careers section and often reviews books about careers and leadership. This week's headline was: “We can all turn our kids into great leaders.” My first thought was – we can all **try** to turn our kids into great leaders - but I guess that doesn't make a catchy headline! Robb said he used to joke that his kids could do anything they wanted when they grew up so long as they became doctors. His wife frowned at this habit since the kids hadn't yet started kindergarten so now he pledges his unconditional support for whatever life journey they choose. But he does have one condition. He wants his kids to be leaders. He wants them to make a difference in the communities they choose to live in.

I was taken back to some of my dreams for my own kids. I named Miriam after the sister of Moses and I hoped she would be a leader among her people, like the biblical Miriam was. I didn't know at that point that some months later, Miriam would be diagnosed with cerebral palsy. It seemed that would be a hard dream for her to fulfill.

The book Robb reviewed talked about how ordinary people become extraordinary leaders and it hinges on shaping experiences, unexpected life moments that put us to the test.

Like swimming in water that's over our heads, where we take personal risks without having a clue as to what we're doing or if it'll all pan out. If we are afraid to stray beyond our safety zone, we may not have these experiences that build our character or strengthen our abilities. And sometimes the experiences that test and shape us are ones that simply happen, and our choices are about how we respond to them.

I wonder, as you reflect about the path your life has taken to this point, if you see places where you had to swim in water over your head? Were there sudden twists or turns that took you in a different direction than you could have anticipated? Perhaps you met some dead ends and had to begin again. I wonder how those times have shaped who you are today? I wonder whether, looking back, you see things to be grateful about? I wonder if you can see the hand of God at work, shaping your life? Can you see the imprint of the potter's hand on your life?

The Jewish prophet, Jeremiah, walked down to the potter's shed one day. Things weren't going well in the country and God invited him to watch the potter at work. Have you ever watched a potter? I find it fascinating. The potter plops a shapeless lump of clay on the wheel and then, as the wheel spins, uses her hands to balance and shape that clay, working outside, working inside, stretching and shaping a vessel. The spinning force of the wheel makes it very tricky. If the clay becomes unbalanced, the wheel will spin it further and further out until it can literally fly across the room. The potter can learn to sense that is going to happen, slow the wheel and compound the clay again. Then she can begin again, working with opposing pressures from her hands to create a vessel of beauty and purpose.

Watching the potter at work, you can't help but see the interaction between potter and clay. It is dynamic. It is a process of change and becoming. Jeremiah anguished in his heart about the nation of Judah, at risk of being conquered and destroyed by Babylon unless it changed. Would the people be capable of changing? Could they participate in the shaping that God was willing to do? Just as the clay was alive to the touch of the potter's hands, human decisions were crucial to the work of God.

The people weren't robots to be ordered around by God.
God didn't create people and then abandon them to their fate.
Instead, like clay and a potter,
God interacts with people to bring about healing and beauty and life.
God invites us to work with God to do good things.
In Jeremiah's time, God asked that the people work with him and change
or face destruction.

Our world today faces a time of immense choice
that will have a profound impact on the environment, the creation.
Theologically, we believe that this earth is God's good creation
and that God cares passionately, not just about human life
but about all forms of life and the intricate web
of water and earth and air that sustains life.
Climate change, global warming, melting ice caps...all of these things
are signs of danger
and they are invitations for us humans to change.
Jeremiah's vision of the potter tells us
that God is working with the clay of humanity,
dynamically interacting with us to accomplish God's purposes for creation.
We can choose not to change, to harden our hearts and attitudes,
to pretend that nothing is happening,
to put our priorities on continuing our comfortable lifestyles unchanged,
to think that one person can't make a difference....
with the very real possibility of growing suffering for many lives.
We can fight and resist the hands of the potter.
Or we can align ourselves with God's purposes for creation
and make changes that will slow climate change.
This is one very real crisis that we face as a people in our time.
We are in over our heads –
in a time when we need to make tough choices –
and we are being shaped through this experience.
We can see the imprint of the potter on the lives of environmentalists,
on the decisions that some industries are making, some governments,
and many individuals.
We can see the imprint of the potter on a movement for change
in how we perceive the natural world and our role in that world.
The vision of the potter working with clay
reminds us of another important thing:
in trying as people, to take care of the environment
we are not working alone.
God shares the dream of a healed creation
and works with us as we change.

In the human community of this planet
and in the life of each individual person,

God is at work, shaping, encouraging,
willing to start over again and again.
Those times we find most difficult, most challenging
may be shaping us into leaders.
And leaders, according to Jay Robb,
are people who move from standing on the sidelines saying,
“Something should be done” to people who say,
“What can I do right now to help make my community an even better place to live?”
and then take on leadership roles
in making it happen.

At her baptism, we gave our daughter the name Miriam.
When she was diagnosed at fourteen months
with cerebral palsy, I wondered whether
she faced impossible challenges in becoming a leader.
I didn't know anyone with CP at that point.
We didn't know how extensively her life would be affected.
But we and the countless people who have worked with her over the years
have always encouraged and supported her to do her best.
The last week in August she and I went to Toronto to Ryerson University
for orientation week.
There were moments of longing to go home,
of doubting her decision to study journalism there.
We spent the time finding our way around the campus and neighbourhood
and she took part in numerous frosh week events.
We came home for the weekend and it was hard for her to go back.
We talked about the choices she had made,
the people she had always found who encouraged her,
our faith that she was never alone because she lives in God's world.
On Tuesday, after the long weekend at home,
Miriam got on a GO bus and headed to the city, flying solo for the first time.
Her dad and I were anxious but also knew that she knew her way.
She arrived safely and accomplished her other goals for that day
so my evening phone call was with a very pleased young woman.
Yes!
The next morning, her power wheelchair stopped working.
I had a distress call from outside the residence where she was stranded.
Oh no!
Although she didn't know them yet,
there were people working for her
and, together, they have helped her cope this week with an unreliable chair.
It was the kind of week we would never have wanted for her,
the kind where she had to swim in water above her head,
trusting strangers, making decisions, asking for help.
We wouldn't have chosen these experiences
but they have already shaped her.

I see the imprint of the potter's hands on her life this week.

Today we baptise two small boys.

Only months ago they began to be knit in their mother's womb
by a God who knows them, inside and out,
and loves them deeply.

Aidan and Carter's mom and dad bring them to be baptised,
trusting that the imprint of the potter's hands is already there
and that the potter will continue to shape and mold who they become.

As the church, you and I have the chance –
indeed God is calling us –

to be people who support them and encourage them
to live their lives fully, joyfully, passionately, lovingly
in this community and in the world.

No doubt they will face experiences that we might not have chosen for them,
experiences where they may find themselves in over their heads
and it will be for us, their family and their church,
to assure them that they are not alone,
they are never alone,
for they live in God's world.

And God, through the care of many people,
will strengthen them and encourage them
to be leaders, people who care about their world.

For God does not create and then abandon
but continues to work with us
and with the whole of creation.

Look at your life.

See the imprint of the potter's hands
and give thanks.

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