



And Now a Word From Our Prophets:
“YOUR GLORIA LIVES IN YOU”

Rev. Laurie Haller
First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan
Scripture: Isaiah 64:1-9

Have you ever seen a potter at work? Our potter this morning is Mixie Hockman. Mixie took a pottery class at Oakland Community College in 1987 and fell in love with taking an ordinary lump of clay and shaping it into something beautiful. I am in awe of what Mixie does because I have no artistic ability whatsoever. No one would ever be able to recognize anything that I draw or paint. I can't even write in cursive. The closest I get to art is making a ball out of a lump of clay.

Over the years, Mixie has made lots of pottery, but her favorite items are bowls and pitchers. There is perhaps no greater metaphor for the Christian life than God the Potter, working and reworking the clay of each one of our lives, continually molding us into people who reflect God's love, grace, and hope.

Our Scripture from Isaiah 64 is a prayer that God would reveal Godself in a mighty way. Isaiah is speaking after the Jews have returned home to Palestine from Babylon in 539 B.C., after almost fifty years in exile. The Jews believed that if only they could go home, things would be okay, just the way they always were. But it wasn't to be. Life was still very harsh for the returning exiles. There was lots of conflict over the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Most of all, the Jews still couldn't seem to obey God.

In this prayer, Third Isaiah begs God to tear open the heavens and descend in power and majesty as in the days of old at the Exodus. He says to God, “You did awesome deeds that we did not expect,” “making your name known to your adversaries.” Then he admits the reality of Israel's life. “You meet those who gladly do right. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself, we transgressed.”

Third Isaiah is well aware of the sin of Israel, but waffles between accusing God of hiding God's face and unjustly condemning Israel and, on the other hand, recognizing that Israel herself continues to forsake God. Then we get to verse eight. Yet. Yet. Despite Third Isaiah's despair at Israel's sin, he says, “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter. We are all the work of your hand.” This verse is among the few places in the Old Testament where God is called “Father.” The appeal is for God not to destroy what God has made. “Don't forget, God. You made us, for you are our Parent and our Potter.”

As we watch Mixie at work this morning, we notice that there are several basic steps in making pottery. The potter first has to prepare the clay by pressing it and squeezing it with her hands to eliminate air bubbles that could cause the clay to crack during the firing process. It's called wedging. Then there is the actual shaping of the clay. Shaping the clay can be done by hand, or it can involve equipment like the potter's wheel, which you see here.

After the clay is shaped, Mixie can decorate it by scratching lines or pressing fingers into the clay to make it more visually pleasing. The clay is then fired or baked in a kiln for a set number of hours at 1800 degrees Fahrenheit. After the first firing, Mixie washes the clay to remove the dust. Then glazing is used to decorate, smooth, and waterproof the pottery. The glaze can be hand brushed, dipped, or poured. Finally, the clay has to be fired again, this time at 2200 degrees, to make it hard and strong.

As we think about this image of clay and our relationship to the God the Potter and to the world, I want to ask three simple questions. **First, whom are you going to allow to mold you?** Mixie said that the very first thing a potter has to do is center the clay on the wheel. You can't shape a bowl or pitcher if it's off kilter. So you and I are whole and healthy when we are centered in Christ.

One thing that fascinates me about the potter's wheel is how Mixie shapes the sides into the desired form by pressing one hand on the inside and the other hand on the outside of the spinning pot. If she doesn't monitor how thin or thick the sides are and doesn't create enough volume, the piece will collapse. In the same way, if you and I spread ourselves too thin in our lives, if we try to do too much, we'll burn out.

There is an inherent tension in forming clay, but you and I feel that same tension every day. On the one side, the hand of the world is trying to shape us and squeeze us into its mold, and on the other side, God's hand yearns to do the same. One of my favorite Bible verses is Romans 12:2 in the Phillips version where the apostle Paul says, "Do not let the world around you squeeze you into its mold." Imagine yourself, for a moment, as a lump of clay on Mixie's potter's wheel. Imagine letting yourself go. Imagine allowing the potter to do with you whatever the potter desires. What is the world going to see when they look at you?

If you're a teenager, don't be sucked into the mold of believing that being accepted means you have to wear the latest designer clothing, do drugs, drink alcohol, or be sexually active. If you're a young adult, don't be sucked into the mold of thinking that the only successful people in life are those with glamorous, high profile, well-paying jobs. If you have young children, don't be sucked into the mold of neglecting your family so you can get ahead in your career. If you have teenage children, don't be sucked into the mold of believing that they have to grow up to be just like you. God forbid it! And if you are retired, don't be sucked into the mold of thinking that you have nothing left to contribute to our world.

We are all lumps of clay waiting to be continually molded. Who is your potter? Whom will you allow to mold you? Who or what is shaping your life at this very minute, on February 16, 2014? The prophet Isaiah says, "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our Potter; we are all the work of your hand." (Isaiah 64:8)

Second, are you willing to be as patient as the Potter? Molding and shaping the clay of our lives doesn't happen immediately, but involves quiet persistence on both God's part and our part. It's a process of shaping, reshaping, and shaping again. Our life never quite becomes the masterpiece that we hope it to be, for we are continually going on to perfection, as John Wesley would say.

You see, God doesn't make cookie cutter pots. God isn't like a factory, mass producing perfect pots using the latest technology. No, God is like Mixie, patiently sitting at the potter's wheel, turning out one pot at a time, each one unique, each one a thing of beauty, but always slightly flawed and sometimes even cracked. Just like a Navaho rug, where a flaw is always intentionally woven into the design, so each pot is perfect in its imperfection.

The truth is that God is never done with us. But that's okay, for God is not in a hurry. Don't yearn for the time when you will graduate from the potter's wheel. Don't long for the day when the clay of your life will be perfectly formed. Don't complain about the continual reshaping, for the shaping is your life. The wheel is your life. Are you willing to be as patient as the Potter?

The last question is this. Will you allow God to shape you into an instrument of grace, hope, and shalom? Remember, God did tear open the heavens and come down by sending God's own son Jesus into our world. Why? To do hands-on molding, of course! All of this molding has a purpose. God wants to form us into something useful. God shapes us so that we can reshape our world.

Now I know that some pottery is simply meant to sit on a coffee table or in a display case. But when the Egyptians first started making pottery around 7,000 B.C., the first items were utensils. Mixie told me that from the beginning she wanted to make pottery that was functional as well as beautiful. When we refer to God as a potter, we're saying that God doesn't just want us to look pretty. God doesn't care if we are perfectly shaped. God simply wants us to be useful. That's how we become a thing of beauty.

The clay that is our lives is ultimately God's instrument. Either we allow God to mold us or we don't. And if we do allow God to shape us, I can guarantee that God won't permit us to sit contentedly on our couch, watch the Olympics, and eat pizza. No, God is going to use us to change the world. "Have thine own way, Lord. Have thine own way."

In his amazing novel *Cutting for Stone*, Abraham Verghese writes about orphaned twin boys who come of age in Ethiopia. Marion and Shiva were raised in their early years by Matron, the director of Missing Mission Hospital in Addis Ababa. It was Matron who molded and shaped their character. Marion, who became a surgeon, looks back on his life and says, "I chose the specialty of surgery because of Matron, that steady presence during my boyhood and adolescence."

"What is the hardest thing you can possibly do?" she said when I went to her for advice on the darkest day of the first half of my life.

I squirmed. How easily Matron probed the gap between ambition and expediency. “Why must I do what is hardest?”

“Because, Marion, you are an instrument of God. Don’t leave the instrument sitting in its case, my son. Play! Leave no part of your instrument unexplored. Why settle for ‘Three Blind Mice’ when you can play the ‘Gloria’?”

How unfair of Matron to evoke that soaring chorale which always made me feel that I stood with every mortal creature looking up to the heavens in dumb wonder. She understood my unformed character.

“But, Matron, I can’t dream of playing Bach, the ‘Gloria’...,” I said under my breath. I’d never played a string or wind instrument. I couldn’t read music.

“No, Marion,” she said, her gaze soft, reaching for me, her gnarled hands rough on my cheeks. “No, not Bach’s ‘Gloria.’ Yours! Your ‘Gloria’ lives within you. The greatest sin is not finding it, ignoring what God made possible in you.”

(Show lump of clay). This is your Gloria, my dear friends. This is your instrument. It’s a thing of beauty. The sin is not allowing God to use the instrument that is you and that God created and shaped lovingly.

Every day Gary and I say to ourselves about First United Methodist Church, “This is a thing of beauty.” What we are witnessing here is a gorgeous yet functional piece of pottery, a collective instrument that is the kingdom of God unfolding before our very eyes in this congregation. But the Gloria is found not so much in our buildings, programs, and activities. The Gloria is in you. It’s in the body of Christ that is the three thousand members of this church. The glory is in the many people whose lives have been touched because of your faith, mission, outreach, and witness.

Most of all, I see glory in each one of you as you allow God to continually mold, shape, and remake your lives into something new. I see glory in your spiritual growth. I see glory when a baby is baptized, a youth is called to ministry, an adult confesses his or her faith for first time, and a stranger is welcomed with open arms. I see glory when a child is cured of malaria, a homeless person has a warm bed in which to sleep, and a Methodist church in Costa Rica is transforming lives, all because of your generosity.

I see glory in your willingness to create, risk, change, struggle, and act boldly. I see glory when the Holy Spirit prompts you do something you never thought possible. I see glory when you realize that you are more than you were, and you are becoming more than you are.

Will you yield yourself completely to the Potter? What is the next step that God is calling you to take in reshaping your world? How does God want to use the instrument that is you, for your Gloria lives within you? You are not just a lump of clay. You are a thing of beauty, lovingly and creatively shaped by God, the Potter.