

Be Clay
A Sermon on Jeremiah 18:1-11 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ September 7, 2025

Welcome back to St. Paul's! We're calling today *Welcome Back Sunday*, because today we welcome back our choir and our *Godly Play* program for children is back for a new program year. Since it is the beginning of a new program year for us, I thought it might be helpful to look at the big picture of our circumstances, in September of 2025.

As we begin a new program year, there is plenty of good news and plenty of bad news in the world around us. You've probably heard much of the bad news already, even this morning. But as we look at the big picture, let's take into account just two examples of the bad news that is so troubling to us.

Looking at the global picture, we grieve the deaths of many innocent people in wars around the world. For most of the past seventy years there has been a civil war in Sudan. During the past two years the fighting has resumed, with terrible consequences. Hundreds of thousands of people have died, including many children. Most of the people who have died have died of starvation. The situation has grown worse in recent months since funds were eliminated from the USAID program that provided food for starving people in Sudan. We struggle to find the best way to respond to this tragedy.

Looking closer to home, we grieve the use of federal and local law enforcement agents to abduct members of our communities who have been living and working in America for five or fifteen or fifty years. During the school day on Thursday teachers at the Cato-Meridian elementary school were forced to have very difficult conversations with several children in their classes. Their parents had been abducted by federal and local agents. They would not be able to go home at the end of the school day, because their parents were being held captive by federal law enforcement agents.

Like these young children, we are gradually learning more of the story. Federal and local agents used crowbars to break into the Nutrition Bars Confectioners plant in Cato, NY, just 25 miles west of here. They used police dogs and ATVs to ensure that none of the employees would try to flee the premises. They arrested several dozen workers and drove them away, including the parents of at least a dozen children. All of the people who were arrested were documented. They had been given permission by the United States government to live and work here. Now they are being held in a prison in Texas. We struggle to find the best way to respond to this tragedy.

These two stories have one thing in common. People with lots of power are using their power to hurt other people. In many cases, the point seems to be to inflict uncertainty, anxiety and terror upon others. The point seems to be to inflict terror on people who are innocent of any crime, like the children who are dying of hunger in Sudan or the children who were told by their teachers that their parents were being held in prison.

Even for those of us who have not yet been directly affected, these acts of terror bring fear and exhaustion our lives. We are afraid for ourselves and for our loved ones. We are exhausted from the chaos and anxiety that surrounds us. We are exhausted from trying to find the right response, the best response, to the evil that is being inflicted on God's people.

As we begin a new program year, we might feel exhausted but we are not giving up hope. Our hope is based on the love God has placed in the center of our lives. Our hope is founded on the good news brought to us by Jesus, that God's saving love and grace are for all people. Our hope is founded on the good news that God comes to us as we are, in our sadness, in our exhaustion, in our brokenness.

Our hope is founded on the words and visions of the Hebrew Prophets. *The Lord gave Jeremiah these instructions: "Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So I went down to the potter's house, and the potter was working at his wheel, throwing a clay pot. The*

vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

God had a specific, frightening message for the people of Israel in their time and place. But the big picture of the Book of Jeremiah is good news. God is the potter. We are the clay.

So we have been given an unusual responsibility in these troubling times. Our job is to let ourselves be shaped. Our job is to let God shape us into instruments of God's peace. Our job is to let God form us into vessels of love. Our job is to be like clay.

This is the Good News. You and I are being formed by a love and a wisdom that are so much greater than our love and our wisdom. We see the results of God's love and wisdom all around us.

Here's one example. Five years ago St. Paul's was closed because of the pandemic. One of our ministry teams was especially affected. About ten of our members had been leading a ministry of welcoming people into the church on Thursdays for a few hours of social activities and a simple meal. The program was called 'The Caring Place'.

The pandemic put an abrupt halt to 'The Caring Place'. The leaders of 'The Caring Place' tried a few ways to continue their ministry. I would say, they were letting their efforts be shaped by God. Eventually someone came up with the idea of building a little food cupboard and attaching it to one of the trees out front. *The Open Pantry* was the result.

I would say *The Open Pantry* was the result of God shaping our efforts, because it has been so much more successful than any of the ideas I might have. *The Open Pantry* is different because members of our whole downtown neighborhood participate in filling the pantry. *The Open Pantry* is a lifeline and a beacon of hope for people who are in desperate need in our community. And every few months we have to fix the pantry or clean up a big mess. The messes we have to clean up remind us we are doing God's work in the right place.

You and I are being formed by a love and a wisdom that are so much greater than our love and our wisdom. So each day I say this prayer to God: *You are the potter, I am the clay. Make me an instrument of your peace.*

I wonder if members of St. Paul's Vestry are saying this same prayer, because each month they engage in their work with open hearts and open minds. This year's Vestry has had many difficult decisions to consider. Each month I watch them debate and discuss important decisions with open minds. They are willing to do the most important thing, which is to let their minds be changed.

As we consider the big picture of our situation, let's remember another way the people of St. Paul's are letting God form St. Paul's into an instrument of God's love. This story began ten years ago. About ten years ago our members started working on an effort that would come to be called *Open Doors*. During my first four years at St. Paul's one of the biggest questions in the *Open Doors* project regarded the future use of the second floor of the Parish House.

For four years we talked with community leaders and crunched the numbers and considered different alternatives for the second floor of the Parish House. None of our ideas ever came together into a reasonable plan of action. In 2020 the pandemic interrupted all of these meetings and strategies and we just kind of let go of all of the different proposals we were working on for the second floor.

Two years later a new idea was presented to us. The idea was different from most of our ideas, because the idea was for us to give away the second floor of the Parish House to *A Tiny Home for Good*. Three years later we signed a contract with *A Tiny Home for Good*, giving them use of the space for 25 years. The idea for us to partner with *A Tiny Home for Good* was different because it was a Jeremiah sort of idea. As St. Paul's gives the second floor of the Parish House to *A Tiny Home for Good* we are letting God form us into a vessel of God's peace.

As we consider the big picture of our situation, I ask you to let two pictures come into your mind. The first picture is a picture of St. Paul's on Easter Sunday, 1996. If you arrived at St. Paul's Church at 10 a.m. on Easter Sunday of 1996, the nave was so full you would have had to search to find a place to sit. You might have ended up sitting far back in one of the side aisle pews.

The second picture is from twenty years later, Easter Sunday of 2016. I remember it so clearly because it was my first Easter here, just a few weeks after I arrived at St. Paul's. On that day, at 10 a.m. on Easter Sunday I stood with the choir in the back of the nave and looked at the people sitting in the pews. As we began the opening hymn, there were about twenty people sitting in the pews for our Easter Sunday service.

At this point in the life of the church, especially with a building this large, many congregations would decide to close their doors. In fact, that is what many downtown churches have done during the past thirty years. Hundreds of big, old downtown churches have closed their doors. Fortunately, the leaders of St. Paul's took an approach that was more like to Jeremiah's vision. Our leaders let God shape our ministry and our work.

It can be very scary having buildings this large, with so many boilers and roofs to repair, so many jobs to do, and a congregation of only about one hundred members. But look what God has done. St. Paul's congregation has been growing for the past three years. St. Paul's congregation is much younger than it was nine years ago. You might be older, but believe me, St. Paul's congregation is younger.

It's a surprise to us that St. Paul's congregation is growing because in recent years most congregations are getting smaller, and many churches are closing. In our Episcopal Diocese of Central New York, a few congregations close almost every year, many congregations are getting smaller, and many more congregations than ever do not have a priest leading them. We do not know why or how St. Paul's is growing. We can only guess that it has something to do with St. Paul's letting God form us into an instrument of God's love.

This is our task, and this is your task. Let yourself be changed by God. Let yourself be formed into an instrument of God's love. Let yourself be like a lump of clay.