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**Turning Outward – Jeremiah 18:1-6; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10**

Ever spend time around a pottery or ceramics shop? They're pretty messy places – clay, dust, all that good stuff. And it doesn't really matter whether you're a beginner or a superb artist: if you're making pottery, you're going to get dirty.

That's why I love what God taught Jeremiah in this visit to a potter. Sure, the point is that an imperfect vessel can be remade into a better one; but there's another insight into the nature of our amazing God – working with people is a messy business – for anyone, just like making pottery. Even the most skilled artist has some pieces that just have to be remade with a fresh lump of clay, or by squishing the old one and starting over. Others, well, can be manipulated and massaged into useable form, though they may not be the most beautiful; and still others owe their beauty to random, even accidental, touches on the potter's wheel. God can do a lot with the clay we're made of.

A friend of mine has been a professional interim pastor for most of his long career – that is his great skill and calling, helping to heal and reform congregations during the period between pastors. A while back,

we got to swapping stories. Some of his churches have been big, others tiny, but one stands out for him.

As he puts it, there was the old guard, who liked things just the way they were – even though they weren't working anymore (change anything you want, Pastor, as long as you don't change anything); the newer people, who wanted to be part of a worshipping community and serve God – and just maybe bring their kids up in the church, but were being stifled; lots of history, which is code for old resentments and missteps, not all of which really happened, myths of the church, ritually hauled out of the closet every time they got into an argument (or, a fight); and, of course, the glory days of old, selectively remembered. The last four pastors had left, shall we say, not entirely of their own will.

In other words, a pretty typical modern church.

But there was one thing this congregation did that was unique. At the end of worship, the fifty or sixty people present would all join hands in a circle, face each other, and sing - to each other - “They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love.”

My friend’s observation was, “If only they’d turn around and face outward, then maybe they’d get the message they were singing.”

“They’ll know we are Christians by our love.” Hasn’t been much of a message lately *out there*, has it? Instead, if you’ve noticed, Christians are increasingly criticized for being hypocritical, self-

centered, domineering, and intolerant. That's nothing new; but for every person that is attracted to the fellowship and community of church, or the incredible love of Jesus, or seeking to fill that God-shaped hole in their soul, there are dozens driven away by perceptions of self-righteous demagoguery. Some of which is true, from liberal to conservative; but it takes effort to figure out what's good and what's not, and too many folks don't want to try. People far too often are surprised when a church does something for the good of the whole community, and that's a shame.

I have a friend who'd love to come and be a part of our grief support programs, because he still keenly feels the pain of losing his wife of fifty years and hasn't liked the ones offered by local services. But he will not set foot in a church, because of what a church did to him when he was a young man. He's done.

Yes, this is a matter of forgiveness – but how can you learn about the forgiveness and love of Christ if you won't experience it? Sure, he'll talk with me, but he knows me, and he knows I won't put the bite on him because I know his past. But he's not at all sure about you.

In Europe and in America we've reached a point where church no longer has authority in our culture. Actually, we reached it a long time ago: one of my professors in seminary, reacting to some social statement of our denomination, told my class: "That's great, and it's true. It is right, it is Biblical, and it would change the world. *But no one cares*

*what the church has to say about it.*” And that was in the early 1980’s. It’s often said in churchy circles that, basically, we’re living out the old critique of the military: preparing to fight the *last* war. If 1955 ever comes around again, by golly, we’re ready for it, since our whole structure is perfectly tuned to a culture for whom going to church is a given. Like breathing. You just do it. But it hasn’t been like that for decades.

Certainly not today. Some young Christians took a video camera out into the streets of a city and started randomly asking passersby what popped into their heads when they heard the name “Jesus.”

The responses varied, but they were mostly positive, though they tended to be things like, “a great teacher,” or “wonderful idealist,” or “truly good person.” Only one or two said anything like “Christ” or “savior.”

But when they asked, “What comes to mind when I say ‘Christian’?”, the responses were almost all negative: “judgmental,” “intolerant,” “hypocrite,” “hateful,” “ugly.”

That’s the way we’re often seen outside these walls, even by our own contemporaries, and that’s one reason why so very few people are willing to talk about their faith publicly: fear of rejection. And Christians have done it to ourselves.

But this isn't new, either. Before Constantine, by Imperial Directive, made Christianity the state religion of his empire in the 4<sup>th</sup> century (it's great to be Emperor), Christians were treated much worse. At the time this letter was written, the Thessalonians were meeting secretly for worship, because they were, at best, kept at arm's-length, at worst, executed for their faith. But somehow, they still managed to *live* it, in a way that others noticed – and applauded!

Dr. Darrell Guider, the Princeton professor I studied with at Ghost Ranch last month, draws many parallels between the situation of the early church and the Church today. We are not the mainstream; if anything, we're caught in an eddy, a backwater, out of the current altogether. We aren't usually hated, but we aren't often loved, and mostly we are what is even worse: seen as irrelevant.

But these early Christian communities did more than just huddle among themselves and complain; they did something truly amazing. They sought to “live lives worthy of the God who calls you into his kingdom and glory” (2:3) in such a way that it attracted others to them, despite the danger to both parties. They were witnesses to Jesus, and that's what the risen Christ told the disciples: “You shall be my witnesses.”

And “witness” should make you think of courtrooms and judges, because that's what they were facing. They were living testimony to

God's love for his creation, of God's desire for all to be reconciled to him in Christ, and they presented that evidence to the civil, religious, and public opinion courts. The Thessalonians "became imitators of us" as Paul says, and others "remember your work that comes from faith, your effort that comes from love, and your perseverance that comes from hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." (v 3) They lived and breathed that Jesus Christ came to reconcile the world to God, to change lives, to transform humanity through God's incredible, extravagant mercy and grace.

And they were generous, despite the poverty that came with being on the fringe. It was Christians' incredible generosity and endurance that attracted many, their willingness to help others in need. Not just by sharing money or food: when an epidemic hit a city or a town, everyone who could, left: but in place after place, the Christians would stay behind to tend the sick – and some of them would die, too. When they were periodically rounded up and put to death, they went to their executions with songs and praises to God on their lips.

People wondered how women and men who had so little, who were so unpopular, continued to be happy, and confident, and serve others – not just themselves. The Holy Spirit began to tickle people's souls, and they began to say, "I want to be like that, too, I want that peace and serenity in suffering, I want to belong," and so their numbers grew, despite the inevitable persecutions, since people who think and act

like those early, pre-institutional Christians are threats to the status quo, much of which is based not on love, but fear.

So. I wonder what our potter-God is doing right now with his Church, because God is, after all, the Master Artist. I wonder how Christianity, as it has changed since Emperor Constantine, is going to be reshaped, again. It will be – it is – a messy process: just look at all the fun that took place during the Dark Ages, the Reformation and the Counter Reformation and other times when everything was turned upside down. God keeps reshaping, remolding, remaking. What will God do with us?

Back to that modern church I was talking about, where they sang “They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love.” Which love were they singing about? Our love for God? Our love for Jesus? Our love for each other, our sisters and brothers in faith? Or how our love for all of these translates into love for this world that God loves, that God is in the process of reconciling to himself, somehow using each of us? Or will we, like that little church, end up singing God’s praises just to ourselves?

Lots of questions, yes. But we are the answers. It’s about how we take onboard God’s Word and God’s love and spread it abroad. *The Message* Bible has Paul say to the Thessalonians, “*you’re* the message!

... your lives are echoing the Master's Word all over the place." How will *you* be the message?

Or, in a question very popular among the Jesus Freaks of the 60's and 70's, if being a Christian were a crime, could anyone find enough evidence to convict you?

One last question: Wouldn't it be great if people sang *about* us that they know we are Christians by our demonstration of God's love for the world?