

“Feet of Clay”

Sermon – September 7, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

Hydrous aluminum phyllosilicate minerals, composed of aluminum and silicon ions bonded into tiny, thin plates by interconnecting oxygen and hydroxide ions. These plates are tough but flexible, and in moist conditions, they adhere to each other. I’m talking about...clay.

That most common of naturally occurring, fine-grained earthy material.

Humans have been using it for 30,000 years. It has this wonderful property of being malleable when wet but hardens when dry and if made wet again, it becomes malleable again. But once it’s been fired in a kiln it becomes permanently hard ceramic.

In our high-tech world with non-natural materials, we do not have the same connection to clay as we did even 2,000 years ago. In fact, we do not have the same connection to the earth itself as we used to.

Clay appears throughout the bible, including today’s First Testament lesson from Jeremiah 18 and the Book of Daniel. Daniel only appears a couple of times in the three-year lectionary as an alternative Old Testament lesson and I realized while preparing my sermon that in my ten-year tenure, we have never heard from Daniel. I think I will rectify that next summer with some non-lectionary worship services.

Though with different perspectives, Jeremiah and Daniel both have a fair amount to say about Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon who conquered Judah and brought the people into exile.

In Daniel chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar has a terrible dream. And, somewhat akin to Joseph interpreting the Pharaoh’s dream, Daniel, one of the exiled Jews, volunteers to interpret it.

In the dream Nebuchadnezzar sees a magnificent statue constructed from fine metals—gold, silver, bronze, iron. Except for its feet. They were made of clay; when these were smashed, the whole statue was brought down

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and destroyed. Daniel interprets this as a series of successive kingdoms ending with one that will fall when God's kingdom eventually comes shatter the statue, destroying all earthly kingdoms and establishing a new, eternal kingdom that will last forever.

Thus, “having feet of clay” has come to mean a failing or weakness in a person's character, a fatal flaw in a character that is otherwise powerful or admirable.

In today's passage from Jeremiah, we have a different view of clay. It begins, “The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: “Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words.”

Thus, we are hearing a prophetic oracle, a divine message.

Jeremiah sees the potter working at the wheel, shaping a clay vessel. Yet, the vessel that the potter was crafting became misshapen, and so the potter reworked the clay into another pot that was smooth and rightly-shaped.

God then explains that what Jeremiah has just seen is a metaphor for God's interaction with God's own people. The wheel of the potter is a metaphor for God's divine sovereign will that shapes the experiences and future of the people. Yet, the metaphor also gives room for the will of the people to shape and decide their own future as the clay.

In this metaphor, God works with the clay toward a desired outcome, yet the clay may resist that shaping and so become misshapen and, ultimately, rejected and re-shaped into another vessel.

We might think of prophecy as an oracle of doom or a fate already determined by God that is immovable. And in some cases that may be true.

Prophecy in Jeremiah 18, and indeed in most of the prophetic literature, though, has more of a rhetorical function of persuasion. The purpose of prophecy most frequently is to convince those receiving the prophecy to

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change their behavior and to follow the commands of God by enacting justice.

The purpose of the prophetic pronouncement in today’s passage is to bring about change, to restore justice, so that a bright future might arrive rather than the dark one that is looming on their horizon.

We hear in today’s passage that God did not simply shape us once for all. To this day, God tells Jeremiah, God’s people are like clay that has not yet been fired. Though God shaped humankind and breathed life into its nostrils, God did not fire the clay from which God made us. We still are malleable. So, just as we, the unfired clay, respond to the potter’s touch, to water, and to the wheel, so God responds to us.

Note how advantageous it is for the potter to recognize the unsuitability of the clay before the clay is fired and glazed. At that point all that is lost is the potter’s time and patience; but after firing and glazing the piece is fixed, unchangeable. And if unsuitable is simply discarded or destroyed.

God’s plans for a nation, a people, or a kingdom, God explains, are not fixed, and they are not determined apart from our own choices. A potter works with the clay to form an object of beauty or utility. But each batch of clay is different and the potter has to adapt to it even while molding it.

Thus, the shape of our character and our lives is not fixed. We remain supple. As today’s passage describes, there is the complex interaction between God the artist and maker, on one hand, and, on the other, God’s people, who are like clay in God’s hands, but are also so much more. God has given us gift of free will—for better or worse.

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God cannot make us do anything. God cannot make us use our gifts or choose the good. Nor can God effect our conversion or direct our lives and our will to a new path and purpose if we do not also choose them.

Today’s passage is God talking through Jeremiah about the fate of Judah. Jeremiah had the burden of his ministry spanning the years just prior to, during, and after the fall of Jerusalem. He saw the good, the bad, and the ugly.

At the conclusion of today’s passage, God asks Jeremiah -- asks, not commands, and even says “please” -- to speak to the people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, to summon them to conversion. But they don’t and Nebuchadnezzar conquer Judah and exile the people.

2800 years later we as a church and as a country face a similar situation.

Continuing to stretch the metaphor, we are a lump of clay and are able through water and the hands-on work of God be reformed to serve God—if we allow it.

But, to mix metaphors, instead, as a people, we appear to have feet of clay—a fundamental flaw in our character that blinds us to the evils being perpetuated on people, particularly the poor, the marginalized, the ones hurting all while at the same time calling for a Christian Nation.

As children of God and followers of Christ, we must be prophets, calling out the evils we see not because we know we will be successful but simply because we know that it’s wrong.

We fight for peace, justice, and mercy not with feet of clay but with hearts of love.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.
Amen.