

“Air Bubbles: The Spiritual Practice of Failing Well”

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Jeremiah 18:1-11

Psalms 139:1-5, 12-17

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14:25-33

I have always wanted to preach on these readings because, for most of my life, I've been a potter. For me, pottery has been a wonderful practice that has taught me how to be patient, to prioritize doing things well, and to fix problems early. When we hear in the reading from Jeremiah about how the vessel is spoiled in the potter's hands, we are not privy to the details of what happens between the spoiling and the next attempt. If you are unfamiliar with pottery, I'll describe what happens between those two moments.

As soon as a vessel collapses, falls apart, or is otherwise unusable any further, the potter must take the clay off the wheel. The process of creating pottery on a wheel requires the use of water which can saturate the clay at a certain point. So, before you can use the clay again, you need to remove excess water and let it dry out until it is the right consistency again. But it's not ready yet. Next you need to wedge the clay on a table to work out all of the potential air bubbles that have gotten back into it since it collapsed on the wheel. If you fail to remove these air bubbles, you can make it all the way to the kiln without anything appearing wrong from the outside. But once a vessel with air bubbles is exposed to the heat of the kiln, it will explode: no exceptions. Then, after removing the excess water and removing the air bubbles, it is ready to go back onto the wheel.

But before it can be made into another vessel, the potter must do the first, most necessary step in creating anything on the wheel: centering. If clay is not perfectly centered before it is pulled upward and shaped, the spinning forces of the wheel will, with almost no exception, throw it off balance starting the process of collapse and recovery all over again. These very simple, concrete truths about pottery have much to teach us about how we deal with failure, sin, and starting over.

Last month marked 400 years since the first enslaved Africans arrived on this continent in what was then the British colony of Virginia. Ever since then, the economy, culture, and history of this country has been inextricably linked with that fateful day, 400 years ago, when this country first began its long and tumultuous history with what many refer to as its original sin: the most brutal practice of chattel slavery the world has ever seen.

Since 1619 we have attempted to address this original sin in many different ways. But we have never quite taken the time to pull the clay off the wheel and do what is necessary to restart.

It took 189 years since those first enslaved Africans arrived for the United States to cease its practice of importing slaves from other countries. And yet, America did not take this moment to see the spoiled vessel it had become and start over. The end of importing slaves put a premium on the slaves that were already here. At this point, slavery was still legal in northern states but much of the northern economy was not as dependent on slaves as the southern economy. So, many families were ripped apart as highly sought-after slaves were “sold South” to fuel the growing global cotton economy.

When the Civil War eventually ended in 1865, the country again had the chance to take the collapsed vessel it had become, prepare itself, get rid of the air bubbles and impurities, and center itself; and it certainly tried. The era of reconstruction was full of unprecedented political gains for newly freed Americans and continued intimidation and violence against freed communities. In 1877, in a bargain to win the presidency, Rutherford B Hayes promised to remove federal troops from the South and, along with them, the protection they offered to the newly freed. What followed was a period of intense intimidation, violence, and suppression of the Black population of America. Violence that, in fact, reached all the way to Colorado.

On November 16th, 1900, a crowd of about 300 people from Denver, Colorado Springs, Limon, and everywhere in between gathered to watch the lynching of Preston Porter Jr. He stood accused of murder and was detained for a few days in the Denver City Jail. He never received a trial and the local papers reported that it was a known fact that he would be lynched if returned to Lincoln County, where he was accused of committing his crime. The city of Denver did nothing to stop it. The governor did nothing to stop it. Not one of the 300 people present did anything to stop him from being chained to a stake and burned alive on the eastern plains of Colorado.

18 years later, the first attempt to establish lynching as a federal crime was introduced in Congress by Representative Leonidas Dyer of Missouri. It was eventually passed by the House of Representatives in 1922 but was filibustered by Southern Senators and blocked. It was never passed into law and no bill like it has passed. As of today, lynching has never been formally condemned or criminalized in America.

Then came the Civil Rights Movement, which was actively infiltrated and opposed by the United States Federal government in its counter-intelligence programs; programs that added civil rights leaders to watch lists and created surveillance teams to monitor them. Nonviolent freedom fighters were treated like criminals.

This period was followed by an intense and ruthless increase in the number of incarcerated individuals in this country, a disproportionate number of which are black. In fact, the number of incarcerated individuals in this country has gone from 196,000 in 1970, just after the end of the Civil Rights Movement, to around 1.57 million in 2010.

Time after time, we have forgotten to take the clay off the wheel, dry it off, remove its imperfections, and find our center. But God is not and will never be done with us. God

reminded Jeremiah that he and the rest of his people were just like the clay before his eyes; ready and able to be reshaped until, as our reading from Jeremiah tells us, we reach a shape as seems good to our Creator.

We have attempted over and over again to make progress without fundamentally changing our relationships. When confronted with this issue in his own life, Paul chooses to passionately and lovingly plead for the person he cares for. Onisemus, for lack of a better word, is a slave. I say “for lack of a better word” because, the slavery of Paul’s time was not the slavery experienced after 1619 on the shores of this country. But that doesn’t really matter, does it? Whether or not Onisemus experienced what enslaved individuals experienced here is not the point. It is not a competition. The point, as it is expressed by Paul, is that Onisemus is not treated like he is fully human.

Paul, almost certainly, desires freedom for Onisemus. Freedom from a lack of choice, freedom from fear of separation from his dear friend Paul, and freedom from the inability to create a life for himself. But, almost as certainly, Paul also desires freedom for Philemon. Freedom from viewpoints that prevent him from fully loving and respecting Onisemus as a sibling in Christ. Freedom from societal norms that make excuses for inequality and suffering. Freedom from the fear and insecurity that is almost certainly behind every desire to control the life of another.

Paul reminds us that it is not enough to do the bare minimum. It is not enough to simply stop doing something that we should not have been doing in the first place. If a person stabs someone else in the back, it is not progress to take the knife out halfway. It is not even progress to take the knife out all the way. Progress is binding up the wounds and getting rid of the knife. The question now is, do we have the will to heal the wounds instead of just pulling the knife out and believing that that’s enough?

This is the question Jesus invites us to ask in our Gospel reading today. He is being followed by a large crowd many of whom have heard of the signs and wonders he has performed. They have been drawn in by his power and goodness. He turns and says to them, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”

At first, this seems like an unusually harsh and discouraging thing to say to a crowd of your followers. It soon becomes clear, however, that Jesus inviting all those present to do what he has done: count the cost of their calling. He is on his way to Jerusalem, knowing full well the price he will likely pay there. He is fully aware of the enemies he has made and the threat he has made to the establishment.

Like Jesus, we have plentiful examples of individuals, our brothers and sisters in Christ, who have done the same. Like Jonathan Daniels, an Episcopal seminarian who, in 1965, followed God’s call to go to Alabama and assist in registering black folks to vote and integrating public spaces. On August 20th, 1965, with the resolve and character of someone who has, like Jesus,

counted the cost of his calling, Jonathan stepped in front of his 17-year-old black colleague, Ruby Sales, and was shot in the chest by an angry local opposed to integration.

I believe Jesus is calling us to first sit down and estimate the cost of what we are called to as a country; to determine if we have what it takes to follow him. Without giving away too many spoilers, the answer is yes. We do have what it takes, and we have what we need to do this work right here, right now.

Archbishop Don Tamihere, a Maori bishop in New Zealand, offers us wisdom and encouragement in reflecting on the story of the potter in Jeremiah:

“And God said to Jeremiah, ‘are you not like this clay.’ So are we; So are we my people, as we walk in faith, as we choose to align ourselves with Christ, God begins to mold us. And as the potter adds water to the clay, God adds the Spirit to us. The Spirit is what makes us malleable. The thing that makes us able to be formed. But then comes the next process. It doesn’t matter if we’ve been totally dried out in the sun, we have no strength until we’ve been fired in the kiln. Oh, that’s good news. Because that kiln is life. That kiln is experience. That kiln is the walk of faith, and the temperatures are uncomfortable. Those temperatures find the impurities that are within us. They find us out. And as that kiln reaches temperature, we begin to wonder, ‘is this the faith that God has given us? Why is this process necessary?’ Well you see, my friends, God is all about process. God is all about growth and development. Christmas should have taught you. You prayed for a messiah; someone to release you from captivity and God gives you an infant, a child, that needs to be fed and cleaned. And you think, ‘this isn’t what I prayed for.’ But that’s how God works. You pray for the perfect solution, and God gives you potential. So, you have to work, and contribute, and be a part of the process as well. The fire in that kiln of our lives is the ultimate test. The fire is what finds the true character within us.”

This Church is currently engaged in the life-giving work of centering our lives on the truth that there is no one we don’t need in God’s kingdom. We are learning to step back and prioritize justice and healing instead of rushing around it. Virginia Theological Seminary, one of many institutes of higher learning to benefit from past slave labor, just became the first such institute to go beyond words and create a 1.7 million-dollar reparations fund.

We are learning as a diocese how to engage in ministry with our neighbors in a way that every single person is seen as needed and beloved. We are learning to remember the past and how it effects the present as we work with others to create a permanent memorial for Preston Porter Jr and other victims of lynching Colorado.

My friends, we have what it takes, and we have what we need. Don’t be afraid to take a step back and make sure the clay is ready to try again. Make sure that it’s centered and formed into a shape that is good and pleasing.