

Blogging toward Sunday

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September 4, 2007

The church's hymnody too readily assumes that the potter-clay imagery in scripture is only about God exerting unilateral power and God's people being passive. Consider "Have Thine Own Way Lord" (p. 382 in the Methodist Hymnal), or the chorus I grew up with in England: "You are the potter/I am the clay/Help me to be willing/To let you have your way."

I'd humbly like to suggest that this refrain is far from the whole picture.

The biblical references to clay find the clay answering the potter: "Remember that you fashioned me like clay; and will you turn me to dust again?" (Job 10:9); "Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, 'What are you making?' or 'Your work has no handles'" (Isa. 45:9)? In Jeremiah 18 it is the very resistance and responsiveness of the clay that matters.

The Bible depicts God's relationship with people as a genuine relationship because it is responsive. How people respond to God matters to God, and affects how God responds to people. The divine relationship is analogous to human relationships—which are necessarily mutual and developing (or else withering away). But theologians resist such anthropomorphisms: does this mean God changes? Is God somehow conditioned by his creatures? Jeremiah 18 leads us into treacherous territory: to explore the nature of God's impassibility (and the once-declared heresy of passibility).

But the very manner in which God speaks to his people through prophets is intrinsically relational. Thanks to Brueggemann in particular, the church is waking up to the fact that Old Testament prophetic language is not neutral or merely descriptive ("Jack loves Jill") but expressive, engaging, committing—always seeking to evoke a response ("I love you"). Precisely because the language seeks a

response, its outworking will depend on the nature of that response. An announcement of coming disaster, for example, implicitly seeks a response that will enable the disaster to be averted. This complicates the whole notion of the fulfillment of prophecy.

Here in Jeremiah 18:1-12, we find the paradigmatic explanation. The early verses offer the background picture familiar from our hymnody: the potter has total mastery over clay. But the imagery allows for depicting sovereignty and flexibility. Phew. God's plans do not function like blueprints—whereby one mistake ruins everything. When things go wrong there is scope for new initiative and re-creation. God re-cycles! I think in terms of my own attempts at pottery: the vase whose sides collapsed while still on the wheel, splaying outwards fan-like to become an ashtray my mother still treasures. Or the jug that lost a handle and became a vase.

God does not disregard people's behavior and responsiveness; God can and does change God's mind! However, the changeable dimension of God's action is not unpredictable or random. God's changeability applies constantly, making it possible both to gain divine favor and also to lose it. The potter responds to what the clay presents according to a moral, relational framework. Karl Barth called this the "holy mutability of God." Quoting from *Church Dogmatics* (II:1, 496), "His constancy consists in the fact that He is always the same in every change. . . .But His consistency is not as it were mathematical. . . .He is the living God. . . .He possesses a mobility and elasticity which is no less divine than His perseverance."

Does this relational responsiveness restrict God's sovereignty? I think not, although the point is deliberately paradoxical. Amidst imagery that emphasizes God's supreme power (v. 6) we find an explication of the "restrictions" according to which God acts (vv.7-10). God does not vacillate—nor does he need to "repent of some beastly purpose and behave like any fair-minded liberal" (Robin Lane Fox, *The Unauthorized Version*, p. 331). This text leads us beyond simple equations of power and powerlessness. We need to grasp God's bilateral relational sovereignty. This potter does not function arbitrarily: there is far too much investment in the clay for that. Rather, God responds to the moral or immoral actions of people.