



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 13

Proper 18 (C)

September 4, 2022

[RCL] Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33

Jeremiah 18:1-11

In this passage, the word potter in Hebrew is *yoser*. The verbal form of this Hebrew word is also used in the second creation story (Gen 2:7 and 19) referring to God forming humans and forming animals. Jeremiah is using the image of a potter to remind the people that they were created by God.

My son reminded me that objects created by a potter can be functional, beautiful, and fragile. A clay cup dropped on a tile floor will result in it breaking into pieces. It is no longer useful as an object or beautiful. It can be thrown away or it can be repaired. The Japanese art of repairing pottery with gold, *kintsugi*, treats the breakage as part of the story of the object. Beauty is created out of brokenness.

Jeremiah is part of a long line of prophets calling the people to repent, which simply means to turn or return to God. God, our own potter, can restore us more times than we can count if we only let God.

- What gets in the way of us returning to God as individuals? As a nation?

Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17

Much as Jeremiah likened God to a potter creating humans, here the psalmist turns to poetry to attempt to describe how intimately God knows us as our creator. In verse 5, the psalmist says that such a realization of how utterly completely God is woven into all that we are (and think and do) is too wonderful (*pil'el*, in Hebrew). An alternate translation of this word is incomprehensible. We cannot fully fathom what it means to be created – from our heads down to the tips of our toes – and fully known by God. What a wonderful affirmation, not only of our inner lives but also of our bodies as they are!

In the verses omitted in this reading (v. 6-11), the psalmist recounts that (s)he cannot escape God, not even in Sheol, the abode of the dead. God is truly present with us everywhere. What can be our response? We can attempt deception and hiding, but that is a short-term, losing strategy. Ultimately, to be in full communion with God asks sincerity of us in our relationships with God and our fellow humans. Jesus says whatever you have done for the least of these siblings of mine, you have done for me (Matthew 25:40).

- How do you experience the idea that you are fully known by God? What worries you about that idea?
- What might be important about our sincerity with God if God already knows everything about us?

Philemon 1-21

Philemon, a very short letter of only one chapter, has been used in the past as proof text that God supports slavery. It is true that slavery was commonplace in the Roman Empire. However, what do we read in this text? That Paul is in prison, and he is no longer young. That he is friends with Philemon, who has a church in his house. And we understand that Onesimus is Philemon's slave and is currently with Paul. We do not know how Onesimus ended up in Paul – did Philemon send him to comfort Paul? Did Onesimus go seeking counsel from Paul because of a dispute with his master? We simply do not know. Unfortunately, the image of Onesimus as a runaway slave who stole from his master is still far too dominant a reading of this letter.

Paul also shows a flash of his sense of humor in this letter. He makes a pun saying that Onesimus, whose name means “useful” in Greek, is no longer useless but indeed useful to Philemon and Paul. Has Onesimus converted to Christianity? In any case, Paul's love for Onesimus comes across in his letter. Paul treads with caution with Philemon, clearly using some of his social capital, endorsing Onesimus as Paul's own heart, a brother to be welcomed as Philemon would welcome Paul. Paul offers to take on any debt that Onesimus might owe Philemon. Paul appears to be trying to help Philemon see Onesimus differently than perhaps he did before.

- Using your sanctified imagination, describe what Onesimus' letter to a loved one back home could look like with respect to this situation. How was he feeling? What was he hoping for?

Luke 14:25-33

Luke's Gospel is concerned with the down and out, those who have less than and are the ignored and forgotten in society. While at first blush, this passage may not seem like it is speaking about economic or social inequality, as we read the metaphors that Jesus uses and the hyperbole of “hate” in v. 26, Jesus is trying to get the attention of the well-heeled in the large crowd following him. He talks about building a tower and the cost involved or waging war and the cost involved. These are activities of the wealthy. He ends by saying one cannot become his disciple unless one gives up all possessions. This only touches a nerve with those who have possessions to give up or share.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is a counter-culture revolutionary. Jesus talks about salvation now, in the present moment. And that salvation looks like liberty and justice for all, where the poor no longer have too little and the rich too much. Thus, following Jesus looks very different than the lifestyle of the Roman Empire. For some, it would be a huge change, and for all, it even means putting lives on the line by promoting a message unpopular with those in power.

- Who are modern-day disciples who promote the Lukan message of justice for the poor? How is their work received? Have they given something up or altered their lives?
- Can you think of examples in your own life?

*This Bible study was written by **Lisa Faber Ginggen**, a seminarian at Bexley Seabury Seminary.*