

Reformation Sunday  
November 1, 2015

Text: Jeremiah 18:1-11

Theme: We Recognize God's Sovereignty

1. We are but clay in His Hands
2. We must repent of our faithlessness

For the last year or more, Pope Francis has been making news by projecting a softer, more welcoming Roman Catholic church and predictably, it's been accompanied by still more calls for change and accommodation to the social norms being driven by the world-wide, politically correct movement. Unfortunately the situation is complicated by a church polity that is derived as much from traditions and ancient church councils as it is based on God's Word. But what's happening in Rome is reflective of what's been happening in the broader Christian church going back the last 2 generations or more as it has bent to the moral relativism that dominates today. But Jeremiah reminds us, it's not up to us. **We recognize God's Sovereignty.**

In order to make his next message to the people of Israel through the prophet more vivid, God sent Jeremiah down to the potter's house to see an object lesson. And what a lesson it was. As I read it, you can see it too can't you. Maybe it's the scene from Ghost that comes streaming to your mind. Maybe you recall your own experience at the wheel. Whatever the case, when a potter sits down at the wheel, he works the clay. He molds it and shapes it until it is just perfect. And when, as on this occasion, the clay was flawed to shape into his plan, **the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.**

What does that mean? At no point is it up to the clay what it is or becomes. It has no power, no reason, no capacity of its own. It simply sits there inanimately. It can't tell the potter intent on making a vase, that it'd really like to be a lamp. It can't fashion itself into what it wants. The power and the vision are in the hands of the one that molds it. The potter alone decides what it is to be and what its purpose is.

So it is with the church. We have no power of our own. We have no intrinsic vision. We have no power to decide what we will be or set our purpose. But God says to Jeremiah, **O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?** Of course he can, he is sovereign over all. For the people of Israel who were quick to reject him and turn to the gods of the people of Israel, this was a warning that they not end like that piece of clay in the hand of the potter as Jeremiah watched. **Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.**

If God is the potter, what does that say about our power to manipulate, change or ignore what he says? Any such diversion from what he says is an assault on his sovereignty as the creator of all, people and things alike. Yet it's undeniable that we live at a time when churches are bending their ear not to the clear truth of God and his Word, but to the social and political tenor of the times. It soothes the sinful nature. It sounds loving. But in the end it empties the church of the message it's been entrusted.

Luther stood before Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms and was asked to renounce his previous writings as heretical. He cast himself on God's sovereignty when he famously said, **Unless I am convicted by scripture and plain reason--I do not accept the authority of popes and councils for they have contradicted each other--my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise, God help me. Amen.** In spite of the traditions of the church and the intense social pressure and the threat of severe punishment, (following this meeting, Luther would be declared a heretic and outlaw) Luther looked to the Word of God alone for his answers. And as the clay in God's hands, we too are bound to be shaped and formed by that which he reveals to us in his word and cannot go against it. It is not safe for our eternal future to do so. Failing to acknowledge his sovereignty and follow his word completely places us in grave danger for all eternity.

Through the prophet Jeremiah, God said, **If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed.** See he has that power. And he announces such in the hopes that that nation or people or even individual would repent. See our God is not only sovereign, but he is gracious and patient too and he warns in order that we see their error and change their ways.

See that's the heart of the gospel, isn't it? It's not for us to change it to suit our ways, but that it changes us. The Lutheran Reformation of the church wasn't just about the church, but the condition of the heart and the reformation that's needed there. If Luther's legacy is going to continue to live on and the truth of God's Word that he risked life and limb to shine the light on is going to endure, then it begins exactly where he began on when on October 31, 1517, he posted the 95 theses and said, **When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" [Matt. 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.** (*Luther's Works: Volume 31 p.83*)

Repentance is precisely what God through the prophet Jeremiah was calling the people to. They were challenging God's sovereign authority, turning away from him and his Word and were in eternal danger. We too, on account of our sins are in eternal danger. They aren't petty. They can't be ignored or overlooked. They must be acknowledged and turned from whether big sins or small. Whether the sort that make the newspapers or that only hit the deepest recesses of our hearts and minds, they reflect an inborn human will that challenges God's sovereignty. We do not stand above God or in judgment of what he says. Rather, he stands in judgment of us. He sees our deeds, hears our words and knows our thoughts. We cannot escape his presence. So we must live our lives ever cognizant of our failures to live up to his changeless standards. But it doesn't end there with a heaping of guilt.

God through the prophet said, **and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.** We are driven to this repentance by God's gracious promises of forgiveness which remove our doubts and restores our relationship with God who had in mind already at this time that he would send his son as the payment our sins had earned. In view of that forgiveness, he invites us to pray as he taught us in the Lord's Prayer, **Forgive us our debts.** (*Matthew 6:12*) **We must repent of our faithlessness.** Implicit in that is not only the cry for mercy, but the acknowledgement that we have sinned and the trust that God will not treat us as our sins deserve, but according to the mercy and grace which are ours through Jesus alone, he will and does forgive us.

Whether we're Catholics or Lutherans or Evangelicals, it's not up to us to reform God's message, but to let God's message reform us from the inside out. Starting first with an attitude adjustment of the heart that then flows into our words and actions. But right words and actions matter little if our heart remains far from him, if our trust is in ourselves and our abilities. That is what Luther recognized and spent his life's work pursuing and proclaiming, so that you and I might also see that our Sovereign God gives us eternal life, not because of our works, but in spite of them, out of his free grace through the gift of faith that he gives us.