

“Down to the Potter’s House”

Jeremiah 18:1-11 and Luke 14:25-33

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Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

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I want to focus your attention this morning on the Old Testament reading from Jeremiah, the story you heard a minute ago about Jeremiah going down to the potter’s house.

The New Testament reading from Luke is not the focus of my sermon, but it very nicely illustrates what Jeremiah was writing about.

Your Bible may have a little sub-heading here just before verse 25: “The cost of discipleship” – and as you will hear, that cost is extraordinarily high, shockingly high. Even though we have heard these words before, most of us are not prepared to hear them. To be a follower of Jesus Christ requires far more of us than we ever imagined.

²⁵ Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, ²⁶ “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. ²⁷ Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸ For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰ saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ ³¹ Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³² If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

In 2010 Marina Abramovic, an artist who was born in Belgrade (in 1947 in what was then known as Yugoslavia), presented a work of art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. She called this work of art “the artist is present.” Maybe you’ve heard or read about it.

“The artist is present” seems like a fitting description, because what she did was to sit – completely still, completely immobile – at a table with an empty chair across from her, and people visiting the museum were invited to sit with her if they wished. And when they did, she would stare at them.

She did this for nearly 750 hours over a 10 week period, the middle of March to the end of May. Some of the people who sat with her were moved to tears. Others found the experience difficult and upsetting. And still others didn't know what to think.

I would have been in the last group.

Marina Abramovic is what is known as a performance artist. In fact, some people call her the “grandmother of performance art,” maybe the most famous person ever to pursue this kind of art, if that's what it is.

The reason I thought of her this week – and she does not come to mind very often! – is that I read the story in the Book of Jeremiah, which you heard earlier, and I immediately made this connection. Marina Abramovic is not – think about this – she is not the first performance artist in history. Many, if not all, of the Old Testament prophets engaged in these highly symbolic actions many centuries before Marina Abramovic came along.

There are examples in Isaiah and Ezekiel, but Jeremiah – without a doubt – gave some of the most interesting and riveting performances ever. We sometimes remember the prophets for the words they wrote. Isaiah has some of the most beautiful poetry in all of Hebrew literature (I think most scholars would agree about that).

But the truth is, the prophets were more than preachers and more than writers. They were often actors as well. They drew attention to themselves, or something they did, so that their message could be heard.

I paged through the Book of Jeremiah last week and counted no fewer than eleven examples (I may have missed one or two) of ... what would you call it? “Performance art” may not be the right term, but what he did was extraordinarily effective, and it drew attention to the message that God had given him to speak.

Mostly he warned the people about the destruction that would come upon their tiny nation. Once he bought an expensive pot and smashed in front of a gathering of leaders, and he said, **“Pay attention because this is what God is going to do to this country.”**

But then, another time – toward the end of the book – Jeremiah suddenly became the prophet of hope. Not many people expected that from him, because he spent almost his entire career as a prophet of gloom and doom. And what he did toward the end was to buy real estate. With the armies of Babylon bearing down on Judah, with the real estate market in free fall, Jeremiah went out and bought a field.

And why? Because God had given him this unlikely message of hope. When everyone else was giving in to despair, and wondering what would become of them, it was then that the prophet Jeremiah decided to make an investment.

We do this sort of thing with children all the time. We hold up an object during the children's sermon, and then we talk about it. And that's how we try to hold their attention. Maybe preachers today

would be far more effective than they usually are, if they brought objects into worship. If I smashed a pot on the floor, I know I would get your attention.

Sometimes words alone are not enough to say what needs to be said.

In the reading you heard today, Jeremiah tells us that God directed him to the house of a potter. And given how important pottery was in the ancient world, this must have been a common enough sight. Unusual for us, maybe, but not for them. And what Jeremiah did was to observe and comment on what he saw.

So, maybe this wasn't performance art so much as it was object lesson. He wanted us to look at what the potter was doing, and it was from the potter's work that Jeremiah drew his conclusion: **"Can I not do with you, O house of Israel,"** Jeremiah says on behalf of God, **"Can I not do with you, just as this potter has done?"**

In other words, can I not start over and fashion something new out of you?

And frankly, that's an extraordinary thought. And I wonder how much you've thought about what it means. What Jeremiah is telling us about God here is just extraordinary. God's work – or a big part of it – is to shape and form our lives, to take a shapeless lump and to make it into something useful, into something beautiful.

"Take a good look at that clay," Jeremiah says to us, **"because that's you, and that's me. We are clay in his hands. And we haven't turned out as he imagined we would, and so he is going to start over. And it may be painful, but the result is going to be beautiful and lovely and worth more than you can possibly imagine right now."**

You know, over the years I have worked with quite a large number of church members, and almost all of them have been wonderful people, hard working, faithful, generous. They have inspired me over and over again, and most days I feel so grateful that I have been able to do this work with them.

But here's the thing, and I need to be careful with how I say this: most of the people I have known over the years – all good church members – have thought of themselves as pretty good people, decent people.

They became involved in the church and volunteered to serve on committees and boards because they were hoping to grow in their faith. They were basically good people who wanted to be better people. They didn't think that they needed fixing so much as fine tuning. Just a little polishing maybe, here and there. Nothing major.

Few people over the years – and maybe this is true because of the kind of churches I have served, but I think it's generally true – very few people I have known over the years have thought of themselves as broken, or in need of serious repair. Very few people have thought of themselves as major rebuilding projects.

They came to church – and this is probably not fair, but I'm going to say it anyway – they came to church to round out an already full and satisfying life. For some of them it was like taking a course in art history. Not really necessary, but they hoped it would enrich their lives.

One person said to me, on the day he joined the church, **“God has given me so much, and I just want to give back a little.”**

Other people – this example won’t surprise you – other people have taken exception to that prayer of confession which we say every Sunday morning. They have come to me and said, **“Do we really have to say those words? They’re so depressing. I come to church to feel better about myself.”**

One person – I’ll never forget this one because he said it in such a memorable way – one person said to me about the prayer of confession, **“I’m not that bad, and God isn’t that mad.”**

Well, I don’t know. Maybe he wasn’t that bad, but listen to this. And I think it’s important that we understand this. What I am about to say is at the very basic level of our faith. It’s found in both the Old and New Testaments, as we heard today in our two readings. Being in a relationship with God is not about good people becoming better people. It’s not a little fine tuning or polishing here and there. A little tune-up and then we’re good to go. And if that’s how you imagine it, then I want you to hear this.

When we enter a relationship with God, when we make the decision to follow along as disciples, when we embrace faith in a personal way, and not as an intellectual abstraction – however you want to put it – what happens is that God takes over. And not just a small part of us, but all of us. We surrender our lives to his will.

And so, what happens – or what is supposed to happen – is nothing less than a radical transformation.

I love the way that C.S. Lewis describes this. It’s found in his book *Mere Christianity*, which we studied in adult education not too long ago. This is a long quote, but it’s good and worth hearing:

Imagine yourself [Lewis writes] as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of – throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.

The word I learned to describe all of this – and it’s a word we should all have in our Christian vocabulary – is **sanctification**, this process of being made holy. This is different – this *process* is different – from the process of being saved. This is different from coming to faith. This is what happens *after* you’ve made the decision that you’re going to follow along, *after* your baptism, *after* you’ve confessed your faith in a power greater than yourself.

You may have thought that coming to faith was the hard part, the step you never thought you could take. You may even be proud of yourself for having come aboard. You're thinking that now you've made it, and that the hard work is over.

And I am here to tell you this morning that the hard work has just begun.

What happens – and C.S. Lewis has described this as well as anyone I know – what happens is that a makeover project begins. And even though you might wish that it happened overnight, the truth is, it takes a long, long time.

You may not want to hear this, but I am in my fourth or fifth decade of construction, and from what I can see, there is still a great deal of work to do, and I usually don't like it very much, in fact I hate all the dust and chaos that goes along with a construction project, but my transformation is an ongoing thing. And to be honest with you, there is no end in sight.

Some days I want to fire the contractor and bring in someone a little more to my liking. But then I realize that I am not in charge of this project. My life – and this is important for me to say too – my life was purchased at a great price, and the contractor is not going to accept any old result. He wants me to be the best I am capable of being. And you too. All of us. The contractor is determined that in the end we become new people – as the New Testament puts it, **“new creations altogether.”**

I somehow missed that part when I was teenager and decided to give my life over to God. I thought that was the hard part, and when I made the decision, I was so happy. And now I realize – to go back to the potter and clay image – I now realize that God has been hammering and squeezing me ever since.

I'm a bigger lump than most of you, so I require more work!

Christians have argued back and forth over the years about whether or not moral perfection is possible in this life. If you're a Methodist – or you have a Methodist background – then you probably think it's possible to arrive at some point, to achieve the goal. If you grew up in a tradition like the one where I spent my childhood, then you were taught that we don't achieve perfection in this life. We don't achieve it until we die.

That may sound a little discouraging, but I don't mean for it to be discouraging. I mean for it to be realistic. Most of us have a lot of rehab work to do. If you've ever worked on an old house, then you know that the project will always take longer and cost more than anyone ever expected.

You pull up a few boards, and then you find that the dry rot goes a lot further than you ever imagined. Instead of replacing a few boards here and there, you end up replacing the whole floor or the whole wall or the whole roof. In fact, you begin to realize that what was there was never very good. It was all made of inferior quality wood. And it needs to be replaced, as painful and as expensive as that may sound.

A couple of Sundays ago I was sitting in church, and I was doing what you are doing right now, except that I don't get to do it very often. A few times each year I get to sit and listen and have no

responsibility for anything. Someone else was making all of the decisions about when to stand and sit, and I was simply going along.

Anyway, I heard a really good sermon from someone I have known for a long, long time. And among other things, he said that dying and rising is not just a once in a lifetime thing, but a daily occurrence. We are always dying and rising. Every day a little piece of our old selves dies or is put to death. Every day we have to let go of something that we thought was important. And then we make the discovery that we are raised up again. We are given new life, new opportunities.

And I was sitting there thinking what you probably think when I am preaching, **“Okay, I get that, but where is he’s going with that?”**

And that’s when he said something I should already know, and maybe I did know it, but I heard it in a wonderful new way that Sunday morning. He said that all of that dying and rising, all of that painful work we do day in and day out, is a preparation for the end of our lives, when death really does come for us. \

Because when it comes, he said, and for some reason I needed to hear this, we will be ready. We will have found the rhythm of dying and rising, and so one last time – at the end of our lives – we will die, only to be raised again, this time to a life of unimaginable richness and beauty and goodness.

And when he said that, I confess that I had a sudden rush of tears to my eyes because it’s not often that someone talks to me about my death. It’s not often that someone says, **“Doug, your life here is temporary.”** It’s not often that someone reminds me of my mortality.

But church is a good place for us to remember that we are practicing...each day...for a life still to come. All of this dying and rising we do, which I hate, and I’m guessing you do too, all of it serves a larger purpose. We are being made ready to meet the God who claimed us.

And somehow that thought helps to make the daily headaches of renovation seem bearable.

Will you pray with me?