

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them - they are more than the sand; I come to the end - I am still with you.

Jeremiah 18:1-11

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

Then the word of the Lord came to me: Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

Sermon

What was your earliest memory? I sometimes wonder if my memories of being four are my memories or my memories of what my parents told me? But there is something about going back to those early years as a child and a maturing young person, something about those times where you could just be yourself. Time before you allowed the world to influence who you were, for people to tell you that you needed to be more this or less that, what to wear, what to say, how to act. For many of us, it might be easier to look at our own children, or it could be even better for those of us who are grandparents - less sleep deprivation, more time to reflect. But what a child over a long period of time and then, based on their personality and their likes and dislikes, based on their imagination and their passions, try to identify who that child is, who that child will always be, when they are being their authentic selves.

So much of our adult life is spent struggling with the difficult questions, Who am I?, What am I supposed to do? and What will I be when I grow up? - that one is asked when we are a child and maybe even more frequently when we become adults. It seems we are always looking to discover our core identity, our purpose, our calling. And the Psalmist sings out, "You have known me since before I was born, the chapters of my book have been known to you before any of them had been read." Maybe we have forgotten that our identity has been formed by God before our actual bodies, that our purpose, our calling has been present before we could form the words "purpose" or "calling".

I wonder if enough attention has been given to notion that God *created* us with our identity. God *formed* us with a purpose, we were born with a unique identity. I would invite you to take some time today, and this week, to reflect on your early memories, about your childhood, and contemplate what that purpose, that identity is through the lens of those memories.

Jeremiah was told to go down to the potter house, to receive God's word. I love that God's word can come in so many different ways. It comes through language and hearing, but it also comes through observation, through the senses of smell and touch as well. Jeremiah goes and observes the potter at the wheel, and as he is making a vessel, the clay spoils in his hand, but he reforms the clay into something new and he is pleased.

Have you ever sat at a potter's wheel? I must have been between fifth and sixth grade. My parents had enrolled my sister and I in a summer enrichment program that was through the local university. We had fun learning different things in science and history, math and english, and art. In the art segment we spent an evening in the universities clay pottery room. Now there was not enough wheels for everyone to have one to themselves, but we all had our turns working at the wheel under the supervision of the instructor. There is something about the feel of the wet clay turning as your hands molded it into something new. The slightest touch would change the object, and at times

it would be beautiful, and at times the slightest miss touch would cause the vessel to become weak and wobbly and fall apart.

Parker Palmer, in his book "Let Your Life Speak", looks to the imagery of the potter as a way of thinking about ones identity, ones vocation.

Everything in the universe has a nature, which means limits as well as potentials, a truth well known by people who work daily with the things of the world. Making pottery, for example, involves more than telling the clay what to become. The clay presses back on the potter's hands, telling here what it can and cannot do - and if she fails to listen, the outcome will be both frail and ungainly. (15-16)

Too often we allow others to tell us who we are, who they want us to be. And too often we allow the expectations of others become our expectations of ourselves. But like the clay, the identity that God formed in us, the identity that is looking to be revealed, is one that comes with limits and potentials, it comes with our very selves pushing against the hands that would help to shape and mold our lives.

It is God who forms us, and even when we are spoiled by false expectations or broken by flaws or imperfections, the hands of the master potter are able to reform us, to bring out our true identity, and we are pleasing in the potter's eyes. All of us are uniquely created, but each of us have one thing in common. We are vessels, eager to be filled, eager to be poured out. As we discover our purpose, our calling, may we also be filled with the love of the one who formed us and be willing to pour out that love on those we encounter along our journey. Thanks be to God for knowing us, and filling us. Amen