

A man stepped into a china shop. He spied a cup sitting on one of the shelves. "Could I touch it?" he asked the shopowner. "I've never seen such a beautiful piece of work." The shopkeeper took the cup down and handed it to the man. Oh, it was exquisite! The customer held it, turned it, and suddenly...the cup began to speak.

"I wasn't always like this," it said. "I was a lump of clay. The potter scooped me out of a dark, damp pit and plopped me onto his wheel. I was spun around and around until, getting dizzy, I asked him to stop. But the potter replied "Not yet." So on and on, round and round I went till finally he did stop.

Then he put me in an oven. The heat was indescribable! It was excruciating! I yelled "Stop!" but the potter again said, "Not yet." Finally he took me out and set me aside to cool. Next, he brought out paint and paintbrushes and put paint all over me. It was smothering me. The fumes were intolerable. I thought I was suffocating so I yelled "Stop!" Again the potter said, "Not yet."

After an unbelievable amount of time he put down his paintbrush and said "There" and set me aside to dry. It was good to sit for a while, but the next thing I knew I was back in the oven, hotter than I thought was possible. I was dying and I remember saying very faintly "Please stop." But of course the potter said "Not yet." It was as close to death as I have ever felt. When I thought I was breathing my last, ready to completely give up, the potter tenderly removed me from the furnace and set me in front of a mirror. "Take a look at yourself," he said.

I looked and in disbelief I exclaimed "That isn't me!" Tenderly the potter replied "You are now a precious vessel. You wanted me to stop many times in the process. But, while you were on the wheel, if I had stopped too soon as you asked, you would have crumbled. If I had stopped your time in the oven too soon, your integrity would not have held. If I had stopped too soon during the painting, you would not have the character you have. And if I had stopped too soon in the second firing, you would have cracked and become useless.

However, you have stood the test and now are a masterpiece, fit for service. Go and serve now, O Beautiful One.

(Read Jeremiah 18:1-4)

In order for a potter to create a useful vessel or a work of art, he or she needs to expend an enormous amount of effort. First the right clay must be found. The clay for pottery usually comes from a dark, dank slippery hole in the ground. The potter reaches in, feels around until she finds the right type of clay to the touch and gently scoops out what she needs.

Next, the clay has to be cleaned. To clean the clay, the potter removes every remnant of twig or stone he can find then lays the clay on a table and kneads it with his hands or beats it with rods in order to remove all of the air from the material. The clay is pounded, thrown, battered, until it is pliant, the defects removed and the material easy to work.

Thirdly, the clay is shaped. Here a lump of unformed clay is put on the potter's wheel and as the wheel spins the potter shapes it with moistened hands. If the amount of moisture is insufficient the clay becomes sticky and resistant to the molding. If there is too much moisture, the clay cannot absorb it and will collapse. If the shape the clay is taking on is not pleasing to the potter, he will smash it down again and start over. Sometimes he will change directions entirely and form the lump into something completely different.

Next in the process comes the drying. Up till now the work on the clay has been full of activity – digging, beating, pounding, spinning, shaping. Now everything stands still. If the vessel is filled with water before it is fired it will collapse. If it is handled roughly it will break. If the creation is not allowed to dry before it is fired it will crack and become useless, a wasted effort.

When the vessel is completely dried, it is fired. Put into a kiln at temperatures of about 2000 degrees F, the vessel is left until the potter deems it ready. Undergoing such tremendous amounts of heat changes the molecular structure of the clay so that when it is done being fired it will be water-tight, durable and now of use.

We are that clay. God has gathered us from the dirtiest places in our lives, from rebellion and addiction, from living only for ourselves and from our sin. He has searched us out, saw something worthy within us and gathered us as His own for His work. But we are not ready to be useful to God just yet.

First we need to be cleaned and our cleaning often is very uncomfortable for us. Our cleaning may look like the challenges we face in life, those things which take the wind out of us, deflate us, overwhelm us. It may be the criticism that we receive from those who love us, the guilt we feel in the heart of our hearts because of things we know God doesn't like. But out of the battering, the pounding, the cutting, when we surrender ourselves to it in the way God wants us to, when we learn from it in the way Holy Spirit is leading us, something very wonderful can arise.

Only when we are cleaned can God really start the process of shaping us. Like the clay, we may resist His touch. It is our stubbornness that does not allow God to shape us as He wants. The problem is not usually about what God wants; rather it's our will to resist that causes the difficulty. It's hard work for a potter to shape the clay – both for the clay and for the potter. But God as our Potter, is

willing to invest as much labour as necessary in order to shape us into the unique vessels He has in mind for us.

Then there is the season of drying. Sometimes we feel like God has put us on His shelf and forgotten all about us. But it is times of dryness that we are better able to see and hear what God is actually up to. We can get so involved in church activities that we actually forget to be the church of Jesus. Sometimes God forces us into wilderness experiences just so we will look more fervently for Him – so that we will be content to simply be, rather than constantly do.

Of course, every vessel, once shaped, must be fired. This is never a process we like to go through. It can be incredibly painful, heart-breaking, spirit-crushing. Very often this is the time that satan tries to enter our lives. satan does not like what God is doing with us and he will use every opportunity to crush the vessel that is being made. It is times like this when we have to resolve to give satan no foothold into our lives. No matter how difficult you find the furnace, Jesus is standing by you. God knows how much heartache you can stand. He will not give you more than you can bear and His arms are always open for you to run to. Eventually the firing will cease and from it you will emerge changed for the better in God's grace.

The message of the potter and clay is a beautiful message because it tells us that we always have another chance,
that when we fail,
that when we have lost the beauty we once had,
that when we have gone off on a path that is not helpful,
that God can rework us, that God can salvage us and
make us beautiful,
and that it is God's purpose to do so.

It is a wonderful message because it tells us that God indeed labours over us,
that even when things seem really difficult,
when we are feeling assaulted,
or when we are having crosses thrust upon us,
when we are called to give up our families and our
possessions,

God's hands are all around us
seeking to do a wonderful thing for us and to us,
seeking to make us vessels of His love and His beauty,
seeking to make us what He created us to be, those who live
abundantly and love abundantly.

God wants us to become beautiful and useful vessels, not to carry water or food, but to carry the good news of His love and call and care and purpose. Next time you pick up a cup or a plate, admire the workmanship and think of the process that the clay has gone through and how the potter has struggled with it

to make it so fine and give praise to God for His love for you. Give praise to the Potter of the universe for His untiring, unceasing work over us, His clay.