

Jeremiah 18:1-11**Fourteenth Sunday Morning After Pentecost, September 5, 2004**

For about twenty years, now, the Carrollton Civitan Club has had a rummage sale. The proceeds from this flea market benefit handicapped children in the area. This year's event was held last Saturday at the Lakeshore gymnasium. I understand that folks donate all kinds of items. Some of it might even be considered junk. I like the caption appearing above a picture of this year's occurrence in Tuesday's Times-Georgian: "Trash to Treasure."

That's a good metaphorical description. Trash can be turned into treasure with just enough creativity. Some people are just destined with the gift of turning trash into treasure. Jackie is one such person. No, I'm not referring to what she did to me. I hope I wasn't trash when we married!

Back in 1998 some friends in Indiana, with whom I was in seminary, gave us an old rusted out vanity while visiting them. I was thinking quietly, "What in this world are we going to do with that. Larry and Brenda should have put it in the trash." When we got home and took it out of the van, I just laughed. That wasn't real smart. A few weeks later, when I came home from the office one afternoon, there was this brand new looking vanity in Emily's room. Jackie had stripped the vanity of all that rust. She made that thing look brand new. She even had a mirror cut for it. It was a welcome home present for Emily who had been at music camp all week. It's in her room today. When I looked at it, my mouth fell open. I laughed when I got it out of the van – rust sickles and all. Jackie laughed at me – inartistic and unimaginative fellow that I was. I'm getting better, by the way.

I'm sure Jeremiah must have laughed a time or two when God told him to go do some rather bizarre things. One time, God told him to put on a yoke and wear it while he was preaching. Another time God told him to go buy a pair of shorts at the local Gap store in the Jerusalem Mall, and take a trip over to the River Euphrates and bury them there. Sometime later he returned, in accord with God's command, to dig them up. There were other object lessons God used to get His point across to His wayward people through His prophet and servant, Jeremiah.

Perhaps the most familiar is detailed in the lesson I read from Jeremiah 18. It is the story of the potter and the clay. And this ancient word acknowledges that God, long before the Civitans came along or Jackie was able to transform ugliness into beauty, was in the business of turning trash into treasure.

The Lord gave Jeremiah an impossible task. He told Jeremiah to tell the people to turn back to Him before it was too late. Their lives had become trashy. Judgment threatened Judah from the north as the Babylonians were on the move. It was just a matter of time. So for forty years, Jeremiah, the "weeping prophet," did God's bidding only to find, time and again, the message being rejected.

Somewhere during that most challenging ministry, in which there weren't many baptisms, let alone rededications, God told Jeremiah to take a walk down to the potter's house and watch the fellow mold and shape a few pieces of clay. Jeremiah must have needed a diversion. One of the oldest triumphs of human refinement is the making of pottery and pottery is one of the first social resources used for creative manifestation.

I remember as a child going on a field trip to Berea College in Berea, Kentucky. For the first time in my life, I watched someone at a pottery wheel make jars and pots and plates. I was mesmerized. Since then I've seen many of those pottery-making scenes and each time, I'm fascinated with the artistic skill of the potters.

Aren't you glad God is a great artist? Aren't you glad He has an imagination that sees what we can become if we'll only overcome what we are? Aren't you glad He is a skilled Potter who can take the trashy spoiled clay of our lives and turn it into inestimable treasure?

Jeremiah saw the people headed on a collision course with exile as they traversed a direction of perversity, injustice, and idolatry. He saw what the potter was doing and realized that even though the vessel, which had been fashioned was spoiled, could be reworked by the potter and become something useful and good. A little trash can get turned into treasure.

We certainly live in trashy times don't we? I don't have to go into the litanies. You already know what they are. Our world is trashy. Our nation is trashy. Our state is trashy. Our city and county are trashy. At times, the church can be trashy. And certainly our individual lives can be and often are trashy. The trashiness will be judged. In fact, most trash ends up in the landfill – the landfill of judgment.

There is a judgment of God. He doesn't tolerate trashiness. He doesn't care for sin. He doesn't like our perversions and injustices and idolatries. He judges iniquities. He condemns our rebellion. He dooms us to exile if we continue in the rubbish of things that don't matter.

I read a lot about how decadent our culture has become. And it has. Our lives have become decadent too. Many of us live for the moment and we live the moment for us – not the Holy Other who calls us to be His treasure. If we live for the moment, and we should, it is to be lived for the Artistic and Imaginative Potter. My observation is that many pundits offer no hope for a recovery from the debauchery of a world run amuck with arrogance.

That's where I part company with these authoritative specialists in the realm of spiritual matters. There is always hope for a recovery. There is always hope for a refashioning of the culture. There is always a hope for molding a spoiled vessel into one that isn't. There is always the possibility of hope for turning trash into treasure. There is because of a Cross and a grave that has no body in it.

Even in the days of Jeremiah, the Prophet himself saw that God didn't want to trash His people who had become trash. Did you hear what God said? ***“Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings” (v. 11).*** It sounds like if Judah and Jerusalem had “repented,” they could have avoided judgment and been what they had been and should have been all along: a peculiar people, a treasured people who were making a difference in the world. The Master Potter, Sovereign Lord that He is, plots doom and damnation because of trash. But if His trashy people turn from their trashiness, He changes His mind and plots a different course.

If we'll allow God to do so, He can take all the trash in our lives and turn it into treasure, just like the potter can refashion a defected earthen vessel into something of great value. It begins with the imperative: ***“turn now, all of you...”*** When we do, we'll find that trash is turned into treasure.

Now when that happens, you may be tempted to feel bad and even useless as a prized possession of God. You may even feel too far from God to make a difference. If you have genuinely turned and your trash has been turned into treasure, just remember God can use you in spite of what you feel and think.

I came across something that puts it into perspective. I changed a few things and added a couple of other examples. Think about this. God used all of these biblical ancestors. Noah was a drunk. Abraham was too old. Isaac was a daydreamer. Jacob was a liar. Leah was ugly. Joseph was abused. Moses had a stuttering problem. Gideon was afraid. Sampson had long hair and was a womanizer. Rahab was a prostitute. Jeremiah was told not to marry and have children. David had an affair and was a murderer. Elijah was suicidal. Isaiah preached for three years naked. Jonah ran from God. Naomi was a widow. Ezekiel was a widower. Job went bankrupt. John the Baptizer ate bugs and chased them down with honey. Peter denied Christ. The disciples fell asleep while praying in the Garden and didn't keep watch for Jesus. Martha worried about everything. The Samaritan woman was divorced five times. Zaccheus was too short. Paul was too religious. Timothy was too young and had an ulcer. AND, Lazarus was dead! In all of these, God turned trash into treasure. He'll do the same for you and me.

Contrary to what many of us may think, over in Athens there is more than Sanford Stadium and a place called UGA. There is an agency called The Potter's House, which is associated with Atlanta Union Mission. At this place, discarded people such as drug addicts and alcoholics learn to re-enter society by fixing discarded appliances. There are two concurrent practices going on: Drug addicts and alcoholics are rehabilitated as they rehabilitate cast-off appliances. Individuals there collect old appliances, repair them, and sell them, only to discover that they themselves are repaired in the process.

Oh, we are all in need of repair, for we are a people who have discarded ourselves by discarding the Lord. Thank God, though, the Lord Jesus has not cast us aside. In Him and through Him we may reenter a relationship with the Master Potter who will turn all of our trash into priceless treasure.

Today, you and I have come to the Potter's House, here at 150 Tabernacle Drive. May each of us allow Christ to have His way – His own way with us personally and as a group. Indeed, He is the Potter and we are the clay. Turning trash into treasure. It can happen. It can happen right now.

**Sermon by Dr. Jimmy Gentry, Pastor
Tabernacle Baptist Church
Carrollton, Georgia**

All scriptures, unless otherwise are noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version, 1989.

¹ This sermon was inspired by a sermon entitled, "No Waste." See Homiletics 16 (September-October 2004) 5, pp. 11-15.