

HANDLE WITH CARE

Most of us are familiar with the concept of “Getting Centred – being centred. It’s been a common phrase in the past 20 years.

The idea can have different innuendoes for different people. For the most part “Getting Centred” means being where one needs to be / shifting to a place of balance in life.

Getting centred is often not an easy process.

Today’s passages grant some insight on what this means..... in a very personal way.

The 14 Luke text notes that a large crowd was travelling with Jesus, and travelling is the key word. They were not following.

Likely they were more like spectators: hoping to see a miracle or simply absorbing the excitement around this mysterious “teacher”–Jesus.

Luke’s presentation of this affair casts Jesus in a harsher light than Matthew’s version. Even so, Jesus was annoyed with the crowd’s lack of commitment. They were not getting it. They were not “hearing” and receiving his message.

They were just along for the ride.

Frustrated, Jesus turns to them and tersely states:

YOU People can’t be my disciples unless you HATE your father, mother, wife, children..... your whole family..., and your own life.

You’re NOT following me. You’re only admiring me.

If you don’t take up Your cross, then you’re not with me.

Jesus thrashes them with a strong, biting message.

I would say it was a bit of a hyperbole / hating one’s family is over the top,..... YET,..... it gets the point across.

Following Jesus requires us to accept the hierarchy and to rightly set the priorities in our relationships.

In other words, we are not in control, if we choose to follow the ways of Christ.

Jesus went on to inform them that deciding to be a follower is much more than an emotional reaction.

Choosing to follow Christ is a measured and rational decision, and not based on fear or a revivalistic persuasive passion.

Emotions may open the door to a new option, but the long, arduous journey of following Christ demands, frequent and intellectual analysis.

Just as love alone can not sustain a marriage, clear thinking and cognitive decisions are necessary for any healthy / worthwhile journey and relationship.

This message evokes the concepts of intentional involvement, of understanding the costs and still choosing to commit,.... and of total submission.

It's easier to be a spectator or an admirer,..... so let's allow these rather demanding concepts to marinate our perceptions for a few moments, and.... move on to Jeremiah.

However, Jeremiah is generally not a good choice for a palate cleanser; he tends to be a bit spicy, too.

Jeremiah is also frustrated with the people. They are not "getting it" either.

Yet, uncharacteristically, Jeremiah tries a more gentle approach to illuminate his audience.

In addition, an interesting aspect about this passage in Jeremiah 18 is that it gives us a glimpse on how a prophet gets inspiration from God,.. and it happens in much the same way as it happens to us.

Jeremiah was watching a potter work his clay: noting that the potter had to rework the clay in order to form the vessel he was trying to make.

Jeremiah found inspiration while he watched the potter at his wheel, just as we sometimes find divine inspiration in every day occurrences.

The clay and the potter became an analogy for our relationship with God. The people are the clay and God is the potter.

And, then to emphasize his message, Jeremiah falls back into character and thrashes them with a strong, biting expose on God's sovereignty – God's ability to be the potter. Saying, bluntly, God can do with the clay / with you people whatever God wants to do, including tossing you aside.

Don't be alarmed by the harsh tone. Once we accept that God is the potter, then we can glean the true, gentle lesson that rises on the potters wheel.

A good friend of mine, Eric Yoder, is a potter.
He has made a number of pieces for me. []

I've watched him at his wheel many times.

I observed that working with clay at a potter's wheel can be a very humbling experience, and there is one thing that is very important.

The clay Must be Centred.

If you don't have the clay exactly centred when you begin turning the wheel, it isn't long before you realize that the potential pot isn't going to work; it wobbles on the wheel and one section of the sides will be thin while another will be too thick,... or it will just not sit straight.

The clay must be centred in order to proceed.

If it is not, then the best thing is to smash the pot and put the clay on your pile of clay that will be re-worked. The best pots often come from the clay that has been re-worked several times. Each time you have to kneed the clay again and all that work with the clay makes it more supple and cooperative on the wheel.

Moreover, sometimes, the intended shape doesn't become the final shape.... because the clay has its own nature and aspects that must be honoured.

For example, a few years ago, I designed a large bird bath top and asked my friend Eric to make it for me. He did, and unfortunately for me, it turned out beautifully—not a crack or a blemish. It was a piece of art worth admiring, and not merely a bowl to hold bird pooped in water.

He told me that he could not “give” it to me and that he’d make another for me. I understood. The next birdbath cracked when it was fired, but that was okay. I patched it; it held water, and turned out to be a mighty fine bird bath. The birds were very impressed and delighted by it. Sometimes pottery turns into something different.

A thing of beauty has its place, no less or greater than a repaired item that works just fine.

In addition, sometimes there are impurities in the clay, larger grains or a foreign item that can’t be allowed to stay in the clay and thus must be worked out. This was especially true with the inconsistent clay of ancient times. There are lessons in this aspect, too.

In case you didn’t know, there are many different types of clay.

Porous clay, used in Biblical times and today is used for earthenware pottery, such as the examples I brought in. Earthenware clay is easy to work with and contains subtle impurities, such as iron, that give it darker colours.

Finer grained and purer clay, fired at higher temperatures turns into “stoneware.”

And, very fine clay, which is not very plastic / not easy to shape is used to make porcelain, sometimes called “china.”

All the types of clay placed on the wheel, must first must be centred—manipulated to be exactly in the centre of the wheel.

Very skilled and gentle hands work the clay to the middle so that it can be shaped.

The next step to making a pot is to form the opening, and that is followed by the “throwing” / the drawing, lifting upward of the clay into shape.

The term “Throwing” comes from old English – “Thrawan” which means to twist / turn into shape.

The entire process of bringing shape / life into a clump of clay is done by two hands gently, patiently working the clay as it spins in the centre of the wheel.

The Potter knows the type of clay; the potter massagers the clay; the potter feels, holds and shapes the clay.

The potter know the clay, and gives it form – bringing out the clays identity and purpose.

The Psalm 139 passage tells us how well God knows each of us. God knows our thoughts, passions and dreams,.... much like how a potter knows the clay. Verse 5 even states that God’s hand is upon us.

/// Jeremiah discovered a good metaphor.

My grandson was still with me on Tuesday as I was considering the imagery of the potter and the clay, and the inspiration I received was that the lesson of potter analogy also applies to parenting.

Good parenting begins with realizing and accepting the hierarchy of the relationship. The adult is the parent and the child is the child. There are embedded expectations, responsibilities and obligations in holding the powerful position in a relationship, especially in regards to children.

Parenting must not be taken lightly—much thought and a great deal of constant analysis is required. Good parenting is more than just love and is not by accident. Just like following Christ, parenting is intentional and demands devotion.

No doubt, parents have dreams and hopes for their children, yet they must be general in nature. Just as clay can not be forced into something beyond its nature, so too parents must respect and respond to a child's personality and innate attributes.

To form / nurture the true being in the child parents should build on the child strengths, show confidence in the child and appreciate the child's unique efforts. Moreover, it helps to see performance through the child's eyes. Allow and help the child to rise up to be who she / he truly is. And of course, like the potter, this nurturing process demands gentle manipulation.....with both hands, always in touch—always smoothing out the rough parts and lifting his / her spirit upwards.

Focussing on mistakes, demanding perfection, using negative labels and comparing the child to other children equates to a potter with brutal, heavy and careless hand control.

Nothing rises when put down.

And, just as the potter knows the clay, it is imperative to know your child. Ask questions, engage at the child's level, and learn what gives life to the child. PAY Attention.

That's an interesting phrase—"Pay"..... attention. Devotion / paying with our time and whole self is a currency of love. Paying attention is a nice way to say "getting to know another person."

There are many ways to do that, including making a point to share meals together and doing what the child wants to do.

I think pausing to eat together is one way that helps all to get centred.

Just as with making pottery, parenting is a "Hands ON" endeavour.

The parents' chores and personal agenda will still be there tomorrow, but your child may not. When clay is left alone it dries up and becomes very difficult to work with. The hands-off approach tends to yield a chunk of clay.... or worse. There are other influences in the world that can alter the shape of a child. We all know what happens to neglected children.

The child is the priority for parents, and "raising" a child parallels to gently nurturing the clay upward.

From love, with a lot of thought, devoted parents form, nurture, always lift up,.... and bring out the full beauty in the child.

Some children will grow up to be admired like a piece of art or a famous hockey player. Some will merely hold water thatin reality, sustains life for parched birds.... or.....in human terms,.... helps feed hungry people.

It isn't easy being a parent,..... and..... it isn't easy being child.

Now,..... back to Jeremiah's analogy: God is the potter / the parent and we are the clay / the child.

Consider the role of a good, intentional, gentle and loving parent, a parent who knows and loves the child through and through.

As the potter, God has a vision / a hope for us, and with that passion, God strives to bring out the best in who we are..... based on our unique attributes.

Patiently and carefully, with loving hands, God holds us and lifts us up.

How does that image feel?

There is a problem to all this.

It's the problem Jeremiah felt, Jesus felt and the problem we struggle with.

We are NOT a chunk of clay, nor are we as a three year old child.

Clay is helpless and powerless, and can not make decisions.

A three year old may protest at times, but still is rather helpless.

I don't know how you feel, but to be rather frank,.... I'm having trouble imaging myself in the role of a clump of clay or as a three year old.

Yes, I see the virtue in being nurtured / lifted up to be more than I can do on my own, and I fully appreciate and respect the way of Christ....

But,.... this total submission thing / the aspect of completely surrendering and submitting to God as a follower of Christ..... is .. Not easy.

However, sometimes I do feel like I'm on a potter's wheel watching the world spin around, and those helpless moments do remind me that I have less control than what I would like to think I have.

We are not powerless, yet we are not powerful enough to control our destiny or even what happens the rest of today.

However, we do have the power to think, to love and to choose who / what we surrender to.

Those choices include the lies and myths that we control our lives, the option of randomness, surrendering to whatever force comes our way....or God the potter,..... with the clarity of Christ.

Those CHOICES must be handled with care.

Of course, God is loving and handles us with care.

It is we who tend to be reckless, impatient and self indulgent,... which is the same as self destructive.

We are the ones who need to consider / learn to handle ourselves with care.

Just as Jesus implored: consider wisely the options before us.

To all kids over 3 years old. You're old enough to be thinking, so consider the wisdom in yielding / obeying / following the nurturing guidance of your parents.

Sometimes you may not appreciate their hands moulding your affairs, but think long and hard about your choices.

They are wiser. They will help bring out the best in you, if you let them.

Handle your options with care. Your choices can make or break you.

Adults: we must constantly consider our place. Are we centred..... behind and following Christ? We must Carefully contemplate our choices and wrestle with submission / surrendering to God.