

The Potter's House

Bob and Sally Public visited a Church a couple of weeks ago, which is kind of unusual, because they haven't really attended church since college days. But over the past few months they've visited several worship services.

They just moved to the suburbs from their downtown apartment. They have a baby together, and he has a child from a previous relationship, so they've started talking about some decisions that face them: decisions about marriage and the future. They've admitted to each other that neither is satisfied with their life. They don't know what they need, but even though they hold deep affection for one another, their relationship hasn't provided all they're seeking.

So, they decided to try church. They both grew up going to church; but as adults they found it to be a frustrating, unfulfilling experience—until two weeks ago. They liked the upbeat, contemporary music and felt a sense of healing and wholeness in the pastor's words. They decided to look deeper, so they called the pastor and made an appointment to visit him in his office. They were nervous, but they were desperate; so finally, Sally cleared her throat.

"We tried St. Friendly-on-the-Hill Church," she said with some embarrassment. "We went there several weeks; but the truth is, we lied to them—or maybe to ourselves. We said we wanted to make friends, but the truth is we already have friends." Here Sally took a deep breath. "And we told the minister we wanted our kids to learn Christian values, but the truth is I want to be different."

"I feel empty inside," she continued. "I'm locked into a job I hate, and a relationship I cherish, but that's uncertain. I've been sober for four years, but I'm an alcoholic and probably trapped in a hundred other self-destructive habits. Our kids ask me questions I can't answer, my parents tell me to do things that are pointless, and my company might lay me off if the economy doesn't turn around."

"I want to be different. I want to feel healthy and full—to feel like I matter! I want to like myself for a change; to feel like I'm going somewhere - doing something important—connected to something meaningful! I want to do wherever it is I'm 'meant to do'—to be whatever it is I'm meant to be! I want to be different than I am!"

I tried AMWAY in the 70s. I could make a good presentation; but I choked when it came time to ask, "Will you buy the soap?" I couldn't close. There were other issues; but that was the main one; so, I dropped out.

A few years later I ran into Joe, the man who had been my upline Diamond Direct. We exchanged greetings, and he said, "I'm sorry you didn't continue with us. I saw great potential in you."

I said, "It was becoming a distraction from my calling as a minister, and I

just wasn't motivated by the money."

He said, "I really admire you for that. You have your priorities and you're moving toward fulfilling them. That's all we can ask of ourselves. You have a sense of calling; but all I know is how to make a lot of money.

I asked, "Is that your priority? What do you want out of life?"

He thought for a long moment before he replied, "I really don't know what I want. I just know I want more."

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There are a lot of people "out there" just like Bob and Sally and Joe: looking for something; and a lot of them don't even know what it is. They haven't found it in material possessions or in business success; haven't found it in relationships or in the accomplishments of their children.

And they haven't found it in church. Surveys over the last thirty years have confirmed that 90 - 95% of Americans believe in God. But two-thirds of those people have not found a way in church—or any organized expression of religion—to connect with God in any transforming, lasting way.

There's a deep spiritual yearning in America today. Last week we talked about the "spiritual-but-not-religious" population; and several times I've quoted Thomas Bandy: "The fastest growing spiritual population in North America is the "spiritually yearning, institutionally disillusioned public." People don't necessarily define it as a hunger for God. But it is a hunger for a greater sense of connection with something of ultimate, lasting value and significance.

So, they grab whatever comes along that seems to offer what they're looking for: some have tried the prosperity gospel, only to find out that the only one who's really prospering is the prosperity preacher. Some have tried Eastern mysticism; some even have dabbled in witchcraft and Satanism.

"I don't know what I want. I just know I want more," said Joe. And Sally said, "I don't know what I want; I just know I want to be different."

Jeremiah is sometimes called "The Weeping Prophet." The "whining" prophet is more like it. One day, when God was tired of hearing the whining...

<p>JEREMIAH 18:1-6 (MSG) <i>GOD told Jeremiah, "Up on your feet! Go to the potter's house. When you get there, I'll tell you what I have to say." So I went to the potter's house, and sure enough, the potter was there, working away at his wheel. Whenever the pot the potter was working on turned out badly, as sometimes happens when you are working with</i></p>	<p><i>clay, the potter would simply start over and use the same clay to make another pot. Then GOD's Message came to me: "Can't I do just as this potter does, people of Israel?" GOD's Decree! "Watch this potter. In the same way that this potter works his clay, I work on you, people of Israel."</i></p>
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And, listen to these words from Isaiah: *O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, and you are the potter. We all are formed by your hand.* (64:8)

And the words of the old hymn:

*Have Thine own way, Lord, Have Thine own way.
Thou art the potter, I am the clay!
Mold me and make me after Thy will,
While I am waiting, yielded and still.*

The applications are obvious:

1. We relate to God—if we relate at all—as clay relates to the Potter.
2. When the vessel is flawed the potter simply collapses the whole thing and begins again. As long as the clay remains moist and pliable, the potter never gives up on it; and, like the clay, God reshapes us as often as necessary.
3. Even when the shape of the vessel becomes spoiled, the essence—the clay-ness, as Aristotle might say—doesn't change.

At a Christian Educator's Convention several years ago, one of the speakers was a potter, and he brought his wheel, some clay and lots of other stuff. As he spoke, he shaped clay on the wheel. I really wanted to try that.

He made it look so easy. Sit down at the wheel, roll up your sleeves, throw down your prepared clay, get it wet, start the wheel, press the clay, and create a cool-looking bowl, jar, vase or whatever you wanted!

And he was talking about how, as educators, we were molding the character and morals of children and youth.

After a while, he said, "Anybody want to try this?" And he had several volunteers, including me. When it was my turn, I went to the wheel and threw the clay on it... but it slid off into the tray. I tried again. This time it stuck! Now I had to shape the clay into a "hockey puck" that was completely even and centered on the wheel. Seemed easy enough.

In a matter of minutes (seemed like hours), I was frazzled. My back hurt from bending over the wheel, my shoulder was sore, my fingers were cramped from kneading the clay and my wrists seemed frozen in place from pressing hard enough to make a "hockey puck."

I had trouble making a "hockey puck." A masterpiece takes time, patience, creativity, vision and forethought. That's exactly how God described His role in Jeremiah's life. God is the potter, Jeremiah (and we) are the clay.

But there are limits to the metaphor:

- a. God never inflicts His will on us. God doesn't scoop us up like a lump of

clay and plop us on the wheel and start spinning.

- b. Unlike the clay, we have choices. We have to climb up on the wheel and present ourselves, as the hymn says, "yielded and still."

So often, we want to be control: "God, here's what I want You to do in my life." "Here's how I want You to answer this specific prayer; here's how I want You to work out this problem or heal this person. But like Jeremiah, our role is to be the clay. This means we are to climb up on that Potter's Wheel and patiently undergo the processes of preparation, centering, shaping, and refining at the will of our Creator; trusting the potter to make us better than we could ever make ourselves.

And the place to start is a prayer—a prayer that has been set to music. Some of our kids interpreted the song for us on Pentecost Sunday. Sing it with me:

*Melt me; mold me; fill me; use me.
Spirit of the Living God, fall a-fresh on me.*