

# At The Potter's House

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Sunday, September 5, 2010

## Jeremiah 18:1-11

**18**The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: <sup>2</sup>"Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." <sup>3</sup>So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>Then the word of the LORD came to me: <sup>6</sup>"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. <sup>7</sup>At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, <sup>10</sup>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.

<sup>11</sup>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.

Ground Zero is in the news again! No surprise here. The site of the World Trade Center attacks in September 2001 remains touchy ground for Americans. The memory of Muslim extremists murderously aiming commercial aircraft into the Twin Towers, killing three thousand innocent people, continues to provoke sadness, outrage and bewilderment. So the proposal by a local mosque to build a Muslim community center a few blocks from Ground Zero has pulled an emotional scab off what is still a very raw wound.

Never mind that the proposed Islamic community center is well within the zoning requirements and is supported by the borough, the New York City Landmarks commission and the Mayor of New York. (Yes, there are local political opponents as well). Never mind that there have long been other Islamic

communities in the neighborhood. Never mind that there are constitutional issues raised by any attempt to prevent the center being built on any grounds other than law. In other words, never mind the facts. The national political brouhaha about an Islamic community center near Ground Zero is not about the facts. It is about two different visions of America. One vision sees America as Christian and English speaking, with its traditions and freedom under attack by foreign threats. The other vision sees America as richly diverse, religiously tolerant and continually reinventing itself in a changing world. At Ground Zero the two different visions are locked in a furious battle – so it is said! – for the soul of America.

Which America shall we be? One religion or many? Threatened or welcoming? Traditional or evolving? Looking back or looking forward?

{Quiet}

As for me, I would go down to the Potter's House and observe the Potter, as Jeremiah did 2700 years ago in a time of national political crisis in Israel. The text is brilliant, though couched in ancient images of an angry God. We are invited to observe at the Potter's wheel that God has no special love for nations. The Lord builds up or discards nations as a potter treats clay, looking always for material that is workable according to a design in the Potter's heart.

We know also from Jeremiah that God cares little for national symbols or religious institutions or memorials or political firestorms. Nations are disposable. But God's people are not. Throughout the book of Jeremiah the prophet, we see God probing, searching, inviting, demanding a relationship with persons and not with causes. Jeremiah is a book of intuition and daring. Here is a God who writes on the heart, not on tablets. Here is a God who wishes to be known by all from the least to the greatest. Here is a God who asks us to live according to the best of who we are and not according to what our "enemy" does!

I come back to the present brouhaha in New York, and here is the word of the Lord I have heard: *Remember who we are!* Remember that we were all born in the mind of God before we ever came crying into the world. We are all immigrants and strangers in this time and place, given the privilege of living in a land where there is water and topsoil and food and shelter and public schooling and public access to information and to law. At our best, we are a people capable of self-reflection and change – otherwise we would still have slavery and women would not be able to vote. At our best our baseball heroes are Dominican and Cuban and Japanese and freckled kids from the heartland. At our best we can smell sushi and kielbasa and sweet potato pie and collards and Fenway franks in the air. At our best worship is hymned and prayed in all the languages that sing of justice and compassion. At our best our politics are passionate and worked out not in violence but in law. At our best there is absolutely no reason in the world why this wildly differentiated populace should be a people and a nation – except perhaps that God intended us a lively experiment to see whether a melting pot can simmer rather than explode!

I remember when I first stepped into the World Trade Center in 1974 shortly after it was built. I was working in business in New York City after college and I was required to take an introductory course in personnel law which was given, as it happened, on the 102<sup>nd</sup> floor of the newly opened World Trade Center. There was no subway stop yet. No plaza outside. No carpets on the floors. There were great bundles of electrical cables you had to step over to get to the elevators and the elevators did not yet stop at all floors. To get to the 102<sup>nd</sup> floor you took one elevator to (as I remember) something like the 48<sup>th</sup> floor, then took a breath-taking express to the 101<sup>st</sup> floor and walked up one flight.

Upon arriving in the classroom on the 102<sup>nd</sup> floor, I discovered two things. First, I was not about to sit at the back of the class, because the windows around the classroom opened out on a view of the distant street below. It wasn't just the street. Even the news helicopters looked like children's toys buzzing over the streets far, far below! And looking down, I became aware of the slight sway at the top of the building, architecturally designed to give the structure flexibility and strength. So I sat down in the geographic center of the classroom, equidistant from all windows.

The second thing I discovered was the amazing and colorful mix of the class. There were suits and skirts and work boots and sandals and dashikis and head scarves and brief cases and back packs. There were curls and perms and 'froes pony tails and buzz cuts. There were sober grays and bright bolts of color. When we went around the class, I heard that the class of twenty-five or thirty people included immigrants from sixteen countries. Around the class flowed languages I recognized and some I didn't. Though the course was conducted in English, the teacher, who had long ago come from the Cape Verde Islands, was able to help out here and there in Spanish and Portuguese. There was energy in the room. People had come to work, to learn, to take in, to belong. I felt amazed and proud of my country.

I think of that class now that the World Trade Center is long gone, blown away. And I realize now that it is exactly that life, that synergy, that impossible mix of identities and hopes and dreams that terrorists fear most. For if we can live the best of who we are, then terrorism's biggest threat is defeated, for terrorists wish to make us as they are – angry, afraid to live and grow and change, terrified of a world connected across cultures and histories. Yes, terrorists can bring down a building. But only we can decide if they can take down the lively experiment we call America.

Never forget that you and I are the best memorials our dead on September 11, 2001 can ever have. Our lives lived with openness, generosity, compassion, a wild freedom and a fierce enthusiasm for the varieties of human experience and the incredible imagination of the God who created us all. For down at the Potter's house, it is not our flaws that matter, but our willingness to be worked into the design of the Potter. For God never asked us to be right or perfect, but only to trust the Potter.

Amen