**“Wet Clay”**

A sermon by the Rev. Christopher Wendell

For the 15th Sunday after Pentecost

September 8, 2013

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church

Bedford, MA

I’m sure you’d agree that oftentimes reading the Bible feels like reading in a foreign language. Frequently the Bible speaks of ancient times and places, so different and far away in customs, traditions, and manners of life from our present day that it’s hard to grasp the relevance. And then you come across readings like today’s Gospel, which remind us of how, with a little imagination, creativity, and careful thought, the stories of our faith remain accessible and comprehendible despite the incredible social changes of the past 2000 years.

I was thinking about that this past Monday, Labor Day, as I began to read the paper on my iPad. In what was certainly a futile attempt to prolong the feeling of summer vacation as long as possible, I decided to open not the Boston Globe, nor even the Bedford Citizen, but rather, the San Francisco Chronicle, because that is the paper I read in hardcopy while I’m out west on vacation.

Two stories caught my eye that day. First, the opening of the brand new Eastern Span of the Bay Bridge, which connects San Francisco and Oakland. If you’re not familiar with this whole saga, it’s been the Bay Area’s equivalent of the big dig. When it opened Monday, it did so, six years late and at, ready for this, 800% of budget. As if a symbol of shame, they opened the bridge at 5:30 a.m. on Labor Day, and they honestly couldn’t find a single politician willing to cut the ribbon for fear of being associated with this project that had grown so unexpectedly out of control. It was as if a group of people sat down to build a tower, without estimating the cost to see if they would have enough resources to complete it. Oops.

The other story that caught my eye that day was, of course, the story about our President contemplating a military response to the use of chemical weapons by the leader of Syria against his own people. I’m sure, like me, many of you have been thinking hard about what a faithful response to the slaughter of so many innocent men, women and children by a tyrant like Assad might be. It’s a challenging moral question – but of course, like all moral questions, its difficulty does not absolve us as a nation from coming to some kind of resolution. The process we’re in now, is kind of like that of a king, who before setting out to wage war against another king, first sits down to consider the relative interests and capabilities.

Sometimes it turns out that the Bible and the newspapers tell us the same stories. Apparently both then and now, folks ridiculed those who didn’t look before they leaped, who weren’t able to fully appreciate the consequences that their decisions would lead to.

But you know, when I hear Jesus’ cautions about being prudent and calculating before you jump into a large undertaking – building a tower, fighting a war – it makes me wonder if Jesus is being funny in this story. Because though it sounds like he’s saying, be sure you plan everything out carefully before you follow me – in fact, the choice to invite God into your life, to be a faithful disciple, isn’t usually a choice that leads to stability. Choices we make in faith almost never work out in the ways we think they will. They certainly didn’t for Jesus, and I doubt he thought they would for those who follow him either. As he says right in today’s Gospel, friendship with God sometimes complicates other relationships in our lives…like those with our mothers or brothers or sisters or friends. Friendship with God also tends to complicate our relationship with our possessions, which, Jesus reminds us, we ought to hold more loosely because our tightest grip is reserved for the love of God.

And you know, with each year that goes by, I believe, more and more, that the individual life of faith can be summed up very simply just that way: it’s about letting God love us. Faithful living isn’t about trying to manage a particular set of outcomes for our lives or hold to a specific list of theological details. It’s not about a life in which we can make all our towers get built on time, or dominate everyone else with our virtue. Faithful living is simply about choosing to let God love us, and then letting the chips fall where they may at any particular point in our life.

This is, of course, risky business; to trust that love and compassion are at the center of the universe, especially when you are dealt a raw hand, takes effort. It takes intentionality to keep your heart open when the world beats you up or sets you back. But it brings with it great rewards. Not the rewards of a stability or self-sufficiency, but the reward of knowing that God always has a new, transformed future in mind for you.

It’s like a blob of clay. I used to love clay when I was a kid. It was such a forgiving medium. You could try something out, see how it looked, and then revise it, refine it, re-shape it, re-work it into something different. If you needed to add more material that was easy. If you needed to take some away, also simple. As long as the clay stayed moist, you were in business.

Jeremiah compares us to a blob of wet clay, and God to the potter. I love this comparison, mostly because it reminds me that to God, my life is a work of art, not simply an economic or even a moral calculation. I was created to be a thing of beauty. When my towers don’t all get finished or I make miscalculations in trying to do the right thing, God can still work with my good intentions to create a holy future. And when life knocks me around and I fall to the ground, I don’t shatter, I just make a kind of soft thud. Though I lose the shape I had, God can pick me back up again, and mold me into something new, some different shape with its own unique beauty. Like a good potter, God is always willing to help the beauty of my life and of every person’s life find new expression -- if we are willing to be responsive to God’s touch.

Sometimes I think, we fall into the trap of thinking about a holy life not being like a piece of raw clay, but rather as being like a finished vase – fired in the kiln, glazed, fired again. Useful and productive; polished on the outside and unyielding in shape. We long for a faith that is firmly fixed; we long for the deep questions of our hearts to be finally and clearly answered. We forget that while God never changes, human insight and understanding of God is always growing. And here’s the big problem. When a finished ceramic vase gets knocked down, it shatters into a thousand pieces. It loses its shape, and the only way for it to be recovered, is to gather up every single piece, get some crazy glue, and try to put them all back in exactly the same way they were before. If we’re that kind of clay, when things fall apart, there’s no room for God to help us find a new shape….just anger and shock and a feeling that God failed to protect us.

A life of true holiness – the faith that Jesus offers us – is to be wet clay. This faith is more difficult because it’s less certain, more open to evolution, to re-formulation, to surprise. It can feel less useful at times because its value isn’t always as obvious. But it’s far more durable. Because no matter how many times life knocks you off the shelf and you land with a thud, you can be sure that God is always ready to pick you back up and help you life find some new shape revealing new beauty, new joys, new possibilities.

What new shape, new beauty would you like God to reveal in you this year?

What will you do to keep your clay moist, your questions alive, your soul open to the love of God?

How can we remind and support each other in knowing that our lives and our faith are always works in progress – whose worth is found not just in their usefulness but in their inherent beauty to God?

Amen.