

PASSIONATE ABOUT RECYCLING

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

2 Corinthians 4:7-11
Jeremiah 18:1-11

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If you feel so inclined to google the word "recycling," you will find it described as "The action or process of converting waste into reusable material." Of course, most of us already knew that. By the time children get into elementary school, even they know about the recycling bins or special trash receptacles that we place at the end of our driveways on trash day. They know those receptacles contain things such as newspapers, cardboard, aluminum cans, certain glass bottles and plastic containers. Instead of those particular items ending up at a dump with all our other trash, they end up at recycling plants where they are converted and reused.

Children and younger adults might not realize that the concept and therefore definition of recycling has changed over the years. When I was a kid, there was no dividing of trash so that some of it could be placed in special recycling receptacles. In fact, I don't even remember using the word. I took out the Webster dictionary my parents gave me when I went off to college – the copyright date of that dictionary is 1970. It's the dictionary I used through college and seminary, and the one I still occasionally pull out when I have to look up a word, although, google really is very convenient. According to Webster in 1970, recycling is about passing through a cycle again or using something again and again – the example that is given is water when it is used for cooling. How many of us today actually think of water circulating in an air-conditioner when we hear the word recycle?

Clearly, the definition has evolved. There is so much more environmental awareness as well as appreciation for the ways we might care for and preserve God's creation than there was 40-50 years ago. The concept of recycling, reusing, re-purposing things we no longer use, things that may even be broken is a very practical way to lessen waste. Some of us here today remember well the old saying, "waste not, want not." Recycling is a practical thing to do, but it can also be creative and artistic.

There are artists who take used and discarded items and create artwork. This sculpture is from Sea World in Orlando and is made from trash collected from beach cleanups. For some, it is need and poverty that compels them to be inventive in their practice of recycling. Did you know that an old rotary-dial telephone that most of us would throw in the trash for the dump can be turned into an electric fan? Someone living in a poverty stricken area of Cuba did exactly that. There are actually numerous examples of creative and artistic reinvention as tributes to passionate recycling.

In our prophetic lesson today, we see the prophet Jeremiah gaining for himself new insight and appreciation for the practice of recycling when God suggests he take a look at what was happening at the potter's house in Jerusalem. At that time and because of their acts of idolatry and injustice, the people of Israel were on a collision course with judgment and exile. But when Jeremiah saw what the potter was doing, he began to understand that God's creative power had the ability to produce a very different outcome than the expected death and exile.

"I went down to the potter's house," says Jeremiah, "and there the potter was working at his wheel. 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." (Jeremiah 18:3-4) The potter did not throw aside the ruined vessel and start from scratch.

Instead, he chose to rework it into something that was new and good and useful. Then the Lord said to Jeremiah: "Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as the potter has done?...just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand..." (Jeremiah 18:6) Certainly, God can smash a spoiled pot and throw it in the trash. Let's face it, sometimes it's actually easier and less frustrating to simply start from scratch. But God chooses to rework the clay into something beautiful and pleasing to Him.

According to this passage and others, including the life and message of Jesus, God makes it clear that it's not trashing, but reclaiming, reforming and reusing that God's prefers. However, the fate of the vessel does depend on the vessels willingness to be changed (Jeremiah 18:7-10). So even though God is described as a potter capable of judgment, God's passion for recycling is clearly emphasized as the preferred option. "Turn now, all of you from your evil ways, and amend your ways, and your doings," (vs. 11) says the Lord. Apparently, repentance is the key to unleashing God's creativity. Repentance is about turning ourselves around and facing God, so that God might take us and rework us into something that is new and beautiful.

In this fast-paced day and age of technology where innovations and change seem to come much faster than many of us can even process such, it's not unusual to find ourselves in a place where we might best be compared to an old rotary dial phone – a phone that may or may not be broken, but is definitely outdated. We get to feeling old and rather useless as if the only outcome is to be discarded. But God is not the Lord of the landfill, anxious to get rid of everything and everyone that is old, damaged and seemingly useless. Instead, those of us who have the eyes to see and the faith to believe discover that God is passionate about recycling. God has the ability to remake us into that which is pleasing and useful. God invites us to change our ways by returning to him, and all the while God is eager to rework us through the power of his transforming love.

Of course, part of our problem is the simple fact that change is a huge challenge for us. Even when we know change is the best thing for us, we still tend to resist or at least struggle with embracing for ourselves the course of action that is needed. We resist because we are used to and even comfortable with our worn out, tarnished, and yes, even broken ways. And perhaps another problem is our lack imagination; we have a hard time even imagining how a telephone can become a fan. We can't imagine a different, better, and more purposeful life than the one we are now living. Sometimes we are tired of the old ways, sometimes not, and yet either way it can be very difficult to walk away from them. We are dependent on the routine and familiarity of those old ways. Leaving those parts behind as the way of repentance feels hard and strange. Heading down a different path leaves us feeling disoriented, frightened and even angry.

Last December, we as a church voted to embrace and personally support the Healthy Church Initiative prescriptions. Since that time Pastor Nick and I have been moving forward, coordinating Workshops and establishing the teams necessary to address the prescriptions we agreed to, prescriptions that are meant to lead us to a place of greater health and vitality. As the months have gone by, I have observed that it is so much easier to vocally support something we know is good and necessary than it is to actually invest ourselves in the process of change.

Clearly, we are not the disciple making and maturing church God calls us to be, and yet the process of being remolded into something different is not comfortable, easy, or fast. And the success of God's remolding process when it comes to a church

is dependent on the personal investment of many, not the few. The reality of these past several months reveals that workshops meant for the entire congregation have often been attended by only the same few leaders, many of them already stretched and unable to do more than they are already doing. What might it cost each one of us, to allow the refashioning hands of the Master Potter to work on us, to work through us? Clearly, God is eager to take that which is broken and fix it, that which is wounded and heal it, that which is defiled and cleanse it, that which is bitter and sweeten it, that which is impure and purify it, that which is incomplete and make it whole.

The Master Craftsman has designed us to be his holy people, vessels that house the very Spirit of God. Paul wrote, "We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." (2 Corinthians 4:7) Often, we see ourselves as ordinary, imperfect clay pots and it's easy to simply accept this image. And yet, God is clearly not done with us. God is not done molding and shaping us into the beautiful, glorifying creations – creations that will make disciples and advance God's kingdom on earth. There is nothing more fulfilling for us and more glorifying to God than being objects of God's ongoing handiwork, vessels of God's limitless love.

When God recycles, the results are reclaimed and reinvented people. As we now prepare for Holy Communion, imagine the Master Potter reaching out and placing His hands on you for the purpose of reshaping you into one of His glorious masterpieces...