

Keeping the Clay Wet

It had been a long while since I had really played with clay. My aunt had been a potter, so it wasn't completely foreign territory. But I had really followed my grandmother into knitting. So clay was not a household item for the Winsleas.

But Anna had a school project - on the Pueblo Indians. And of course, this involved constructing a model-sized pueblo to present in class. We got the modeling clay from our local Joanne Fabrics. Cleared the dining room table and got to work.

I think Anna had fun with it. It was messier than she had envisioned. She had to get her hands really wet in order to get the clay to soften up and do what she wanted. And of course, the wetter her hands got the messier the clay got. She was a bit hesitant at first to let herself get that dirty, that covered in clay. But eventually she trusted the process.

As long as the clay was kept wet or damp, you could shape it in any way you needed or wanted. But as the clay dried, at some point it passed the point of no return. And it became too dried out, turned rock hard. Once it had dried out too much, there was no bringing the clay back in order to make adjustments.

Not unlike our reading this morning. The Holy Spirit was having to work pretty hard with Peter in order to make some adjustments. As we heard read, it took Peter being given a vision three times. And it took the Spirit telling Peter to go with Cornelius's deputation. After hearing about Cornelius' vision, Peter began to put the pieces into place claiming, "God shows no partiality." And he starts to preach. But it took another visit of the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius and all his household, before Peter finally gets tipped over the edge.

"What can stop these people who have received the Holy Spirit, even as we have, from being baptized with water?"

The water gets applied to all those in the household and God works to reshape the church.

Up until then, Peter - the rock upon whom the church would be built, as Jesus says - Peter was not convinced that the message he was bringing to the world was really for the *world*. He was suspicious that it was actually meant for his people, the Jewish tribe. Despite what Jesus might have said and done. Despite how Jesus broke barriers of every kind and reshaped community.

It took a good dose of holy water to begin to reshape the stone of Peter.

The prophet Isaiah writes, “[Y]ou are our mother and father, Yahweh; we are the clay and you are the potter, we are all the work of your hands.”¹ That is true of us as individuals, surely. But even more true of the church.

The more we apply water to this construction called the church, the more we are open to new expression, new formation, of who we are as a people gathered in God’s name.

I think about this passage in terms of how I and how we might be acting like Peter - and not even know it. Certainly not intentionally.

We here at Lincoln Street have worked hard at pushing back against the stone-like structures of the Methodist church that have felt stifling, limiting, too rigid. We celebrate the ways in which our expression of faith has provided a home for those who have felt disenfranchised from Christianity. We proudly assert our inclusiveness.

But I think it’s even harder for people who work diligently at inclusiveness to see where it is they still have room to grow.

And yet, undoubtedly, if we gaze about this room, we can each see ways in which this community is missing pieces. In other words, we have places of growth, ways in which the Holy Spirit can work upon us to mold us into something new.

¹ Isaiah 64:8. Translation from *The Inclusive Bible*, page 262.

But if Peter's story is any representation, we know this isn't always easy work. Often it is hard for one to *see* the ways in which we have become calcified. Let alone then be able to move toward making changes. Peter was so ingrained to keeping kosher that he couldn't imagine that God was calling him to be unclean.

God had to step in and redefine what clean meant. And then reassure Peter several times that it would all be okay - if he stepped away from a tradition that had grounded him for his whole life. A pattern of separation that spoke of his very faithfulness.

I am struck by the end of this story, where Peter is preaching and the Holy Spirit interrupts by descending upon the party gathered and infusing the band of Gentiles. Peter's response of baptism is a post-Spirit ritual. It is the outward sign of an already inward reality. It is the action of a community that needs to mark physically for themselves what they know has already taken place.

So often, baptism, that ritual that marks people as in or out of the church, so often baptism has been used as a method of gate-keeping. Let's make sure that you are of our ilk enough to join in. Let's make sure you can recite the correct doctrine and affirm the appropriate values. Let's make sure you are enough like us to be an official part of us.

But the reality is that the Holy Spirit is at work far beyond the gate-keeping of the church.

And there is much that she wants to stir up within us and among us.

She wants to take the waters of baptism and give us a good dousing. Soften us up that we might be molded and shaped into forms we can't yet imagine.

If you are really thinking this through, I hope it makes your stomach do a flip or two. Because I can assure you, when we are the clay in the potter's hands, when we truly let God shape and form us, there are no limits.

You better believe that Peter's stomach did a backflip or two. And not just because he was eating food he had never eaten before. He was breaking the law of the land, being with Cornelius. And even more, he was working so outside his normal that he was missing the roadmap. He truly was taking it one step at a time. Following the deputation, staying the night, preaching to the crowd, and ultimately baptizing.

If we take the water of baptism and apply it liberally to ourselves, we can be assured that we won't recognize ourselves down the road. *And* we can be assured that will be a very good thing.

I don't know about you, but even as I hesitate at the notion of such reformation, even as I balk at losing a sense of control over what *I* think is important, I am curious. Are you? I want to see

where the calcifications are that I have not even perceived. I want to be soaked in the waters so that God's spirit might be at work.

We each can seek this in our individual lives. We can work toward this as a congregation. And we can challenge our church to be made ever more pliant in the hands of the potter.

It will mean less tradition and more innovation. It will mean less doctrine and more experience. It will mean less reassurance and more challenge.

The wetter we get, the more immersed in the leading of the spirit, the messier things are liable to become.

It will also mean growth beyond our expectation. It will mean seeing horizons we didn't even know to look for. It will mean joy and delight as we discover the vitality that can come from the new. It will mean continuing to be alive in the spirit and to the spirit who wants us to dance as partners.

Amen.