

Made to be Remade

*The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 8 September 2019.
Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33.*

I have always loved Play-Doh. Still do – so long as you don't play with it on the carpet.

Like the clay pot in Jeremiah, Play-Doh started out as one thing and became something else. It was invented in the 1930's at the request of the Kroger company. They asked a soap maker in Cincinnati named Noah McVicker to come up with something that would clean wallpaper. Most homes in the area were heated with coal, which left soot on the walls. McVicker invented a putty that lifted soot without damaging wallpaper. It sold well for decades. But after WWII, people switched to natural gas for heating. No more soot on the walls. Plus, vinyl wallpaper came into fashion, which cleaned more easily. All of a sudden, the market for wallpaper putty vanished. The McVicker family company was about to go under.

Then the sister-in-law of Noah's nephew came up with a great idea. Her name was Kay Zufall, and she was a preschool teacher. As an aside, I'm convinced that the smartest teachers teach the youngest students. I see it all the time at St. Thomas Day School. It takes a certain kind of genius to keep a room of three-year-olds occupied and productive and happy. Kay Zufall was certainly in that category. Her students had trouble working with hard modeling clay. She heard some teachers were using wallpaper putty instead. She tried it with her classes, and the children loved it. She convinced the McVickers to market their wallpaper putty as a child's toy and call it Play-Doh. In 1956, they took the product to an education convention. In 1957, they advertised on Captain Kangaroo. By 1958, sales reached nearly \$3 million. Since then, over 3 billion cans have been sold.

“Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.” Imagine God having as much fun shaping us as a preschooler with Play-Doh. Part of the wonder of Play-Doh is that if you put it back in the container, it will last a long time. You can use it over and over again. It won't dry out or harden, unless you leave it out and ignore it. And God is not about to do that. *“Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand.”*

But Play-Doh does take a beating. I remember pounding it with a little plastic rolling pin until you could almost see through it. It gets stretched and extruded into all kinds of shapes.

And the people of Judah may have felt similarly beaten and oppressed. The Lord speaks of sending disaster, not sending disaster, building up, and deciding not to build up. The Lord declared, *“At another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, 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.”*

Please don't hear these words of the Lord as words of vengeance or whims of control. These are the words of a parent disciplining a child. Good choices are rewarded. Bad choices are punished. The Lord wanted the people to make good choices.

But they had made bad choices, so the Lord was about to change the Lord's mind. The nation was in the downward part of that cycle. We talked about their troubles last week. They had turned away from the worship of God **and** the works of God. Jeremiah was preaching near Jerusalem, where the temple was. It should have been a holy place, but the people were not living in holy ways. So the Lord begged them. *“Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.”* (Jeremiah 22:3). All of

those things were going on. The people were breaking God's heart. So Jeremiah's vision ended with a clear warning. *"Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you."* Jeremiah had just seen the potter take a clay pot off the wheel and turn it back into a clay blob. The prophet felt sufficiently warned and probably more than a little terrified.

But the warning was not the end of the story. Even the warning was an invitation to a new beginning. *"Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings."* The end of the story was not yet written. Even now, the people of Judah were invited to go back to the beginning and start over, like fresh Play-Doh straight from the can.

Turn your attention now to the psalm. The psalmist spoke of God knitting us together in the womb. The psalmist seems to have the same resiliency in mind. The writer could have imagined God building us with bricks into a mighty tower, or laying us out like stones along a path, or mixed and baked like a loaf of bread. Instead, the psalmist said we are knit like a blanket. We're stretchy. The threads that compose our lives can be removed and reworked. *"Such knowledge is too wonderful for me."*

Friends, we are made to be remade. We are made to be shaped by struggle but not destroyed by it. We are made with the ability to repent and start over. We can be pressed as flat as a pancake one day and shaped into dinosaurs and unicorns the next. Our minds and lives can be and should be molded and changed and transformed.

Even our relationships can be made new. That's what Paul reminded Philemon. All we know about the situation is what is in this little letter, 25 verses total. Philemon appears to have been the leader of a church that met in his house. Onesimus was a slave from his household. Onesimus visited Paul in prison and became a follower of Jesus and a great help to Paul. Paul wanted to keep Onesimus with him as a fellow worker. But it was more important to Paul for the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus to be transformed. So he sent Onesimus back with this letter, urging Philemon to receive Onesimus not as a slave but as a beloved brother.

We don't really know what happened after that, but there's an old Christian tradition that says Onesimus eventually became Bishop of Ephesus. I think it is safe to assume Philemon's attitude toward him was transformed. Together they were molded and shaped into something new.

Finally, Jesus said sometimes our plans need to change. The builder who wants to build a tower can count the cost and decide to wait. The king about to wage war can decide it is better to negotiate peace. The possessions and obligations that start to weigh us down can be released so that we can follow Jesus more fully.

We are made to be remade. We are not finished products, thanks be to God. But the trick is to maintain that blessed resilience, to stay pliable and loose in God's hands. Jesus did that by spending time with his disciples and time alone with God. Our Jewish friends model six days of labor and one day of sabbath. The monastics encourage a rhythm of work and reading and prayer. The point of all these examples is the same. Don't dry out. Don't stay out on the preschool table all day. Stay fresh.

However, if you do leave Play-Doh out a little too long, if it starts to harden, the manufacturer says you may be able to restore it. They recommend water. Try adding water one drop at a time and working it into the Doh. Or try covering the compound with a damp paper towel, returning it to the container, and leaving it there overnight. When Play-Doh dries out, give it a little water.

That's why we keep our baptismal font by the door. When you feel dried out or beaten down, touch the water. Remember your baptism. Remember that you are sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own

forever. Remember the person you are trying to be with God's help. Remember that you are on this journey with others. Remember God is in the business of remaking all of us. Like clay in the potter's hand.

Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts; for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast of your mercy. *Amen.*

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The history of Play-Doh is at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Play-Doh>.

Instructions on restoring dry Play-Doh are at <https://playdoh.hasbro.com/en-us/faq>.

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