



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Holy Dirt
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, September 8, 2019
The Rev. Paul McLain

'The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel.' In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Michael McNeely is the historian of Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Little Rock and often gives the docent tours for visitors, new members, and school children. He always takes the tour group to the area in front of the altar, and asks them to look down at the floor and see if they can spot the imperfection. Everyone looks down and it usually takes a minute or so until someone says, "I think I found it." That person, often a child, will then point out where the cross-shaped pattern of one little section is slightly different from the other sections of the floor.

Michael then says, "That's a reminder of how we come to the table, imperfect. Christ gives us bread and wine in spite of our imperfections, and nourishes us so that we can become a little more perfect and go out and serve an imperfect world. It doesn't so much matter your doctrine of what happens at the table. What matters is that you *come to* the table. Because by coming to the table, you are inviting Christ into yourself."

Each time Michael offers a tour, there is something humbling and even hopeful about seeing that tiny flaw in the floor. But that tiny flaw in the floor at Trinity Cathedral is nothing compared to the one at El Santuario de Chimayo, a church in a remote pueblo in northern New Mexico. That church has an actual hole in the floor. And that church is the most popular site of Catholic pilgrimage in the United States and attracts a half million visitors a year. Not in spite of the hole in the floor, but because of it. You see, stories have been passed down for many generations about the healing properties from the dirt that comes from that hole. It is called the Holy Dirt of Chimayo.

One of the first stories is that Bernardo Abeyta, a community leader and landowner, was in his fields near the Santa Cruz River one day in the early 1800's. He noticed a glowing light shimmering in the ground. He walked over to the light and dug with his hands in the ground beneath it. There he discovered a large crucifix, a replica of Jesus on the cross, buried in the ground. In awe of the crucifix, the devout Bernardo took it to his parish church eight miles away. He told Father Alvarez his story and the two of them placed the crucifix on the altar of the parish church and then Bernardo walked home.

The next day he went out to his field and found the crucifix back in the same spot in the ground. He once again took it to the parish church in Santa Cruz, this time with the mystified people of the town at his side. Again, it returned to the hole in his field. It dawned on Bernardo that this may be Jesus's way of choosing the spot where he wanted to be remembered and worshiped.

I wonder if this story says something more about the nature of Jesus: Instead of being fixed on an altar, he seems to want to roam around the countryside and to get his hands in the dirt.

With the permission and help of Father Alvarez, Bernardo started construction on the church in 1813 and finished it three years later. Before he even finished construction, people came from all over to pray, to see and adore the crucifix, and to gather dirt from the hole from whence it came. The dirt in the hole, according to the multitudes, had the power to heal. But the story of the holy dirt could be much earlier than this. The Tewa Pueblo Indians, who have lived in the region for thousands of years, speak of Tsi Mayoh Hill, which rises behind the church at Chimayo. They remember stories of openings in the hill, out of which flowed healing mud.

Holy dirt or holy mud is at the heart of our Old Testament lesson from Jeremiah today. Jeremiah has just come out of retirement as a prophet and preacher because of a change in the land of Judah. The great king and reformer Josiah had died, and the manner he set for the people in being true to God's covenant died with him. A new king emerged who was a self-serving puppet of Egyptian power.

Jeremiah came back to ask, preach, and live this question: Is God's plan of judgement fixed and inevitable or can it be averted? That question prompts more timeless questions for us. Do our actions as human beings really have any effect on what God decides to do? And, can God change God's mind?

To explore these questions, Jeremiah used an image to which everyone of his day could relate, the potter and the clay. Pottery was the greatest technological advance of that day, as well as being the most beautiful and purest art form of that civilization. Before the invention of pottery, life was reduced such that what could be managed in a single day depended on what a person could hold in her hands at one time. The storage capabilities of pottery extended life beyond the immediate, beyond the urgent. Every pot is also an art form with different shapes, proportions, colors, curves, and textures.

Eugene Peterson writes: "Today, we commonly separate the useful and the beautiful, the necessary and the elegant. We use brown paper bags for containers which no one bothers to give shape or color or design. After all, we only want something in which to get our groceries home. Then we buy paintings to beautify the walls of our homes. We build featureless office buildings and ugly factories for our necessary work, then we build museums to contain objects of beauty. But there have been times in history when these things were done better, when the necessary and the beautiful were integrated, when, in

fact, it was impossible to think of separating them. For Jeremiah this was certainly the case: there were no brown paper bags and there were no museums, but there was pottery.”

Pottery is where the divine and the earthly meet, literally. One thing I’ve learned from my wife Ruthie, who finds it soothing to her soul to do pottery, there is no way to do pottery without getting your hands dirty. In fact, that’s part of the sheer joy of doing it.

This metaphor gives us a different image of the Almighty. The Creator God with a pair of dirty hands. It also gives us a different view of creation. Instead of seeing it as making something out of nothing, God is forming and re-forming what is already present. There is a lot of trial and error in pottery. But the key thing is not to throw out the clay. Instead, a potter keeps working with it, to shape and re-shape it. And the potter is affected by what she creates.

When we lived in New Mexico, a fellow potter gave Ruthie a gift of some holy dirt from the church in Chimayo. Ruthie has made a number of different crosses over the years and always puts a little of the holy dirt in each cross. They have come to remind me of how the divine and the earthly become one in Jesus.

And, as we yield to be formed and shaped by him, the divine and the earthly become one in us. We then join Jesus in getting our hands dirty to reshape the world so that it is filled with love, redemption, and second chances. God is not done with us yet. We are all vessels of hope, healing, and imagination. In spite of and perhaps because of all our imperfections, God still longs to cradle us and mold us, to lift us up to the beauty of our immortality as nothing less than holy dirt. *Amen.*