

When the Potter Meets the Clay

Stephen Van Kuiken
Community Congregational U.C.C.
Pullman, WA
July 11, 2021

Readings: Genesis 2:4-7, Romans 9:19-21

When I was a kid, there was a TV show that had a puppeteer who would ask a child to draw a crazy, squiggly line. He would then start drawing and chatting with the child. Finally, when he was done, he would show us. He had taken that squiggly nonsensical line and made a marvelous picture with it.

God's skill is like that, I believe. There is not one immutable divine plan that is set into stone. Rather, God's plans are fluid, responding to the world's squiggly lines, continually bringing about order and harmony out of chaos.

This, it seems to me, is how we in the 21st Century can talk about God as the Creator. God continually reacts and responds to what the world is doing, what each creature is doing. Calling forth new things, new creatures, new worlds.

Now, many people, when they talk about God as Creator, this refers to an action that is done in the past. God as Creator is contained in those first two chapters in Genesis about the primordial beginnings of the universe and of life.

An extreme example was the thinking of the Deists, some of whom were among this nation's "founding fathers." They viewed God as kind of a Divine Clockmaker, who built this complex and interrelated system, wound it up, turned it on, and then stepped back, never to interact with it again.

Others have a similar view except that God very occasionally breaks into the natural course of things, intervening with a supernatural act, interrupting the divine clock.

But there's another way to view the Creator, it seems to me, that is more profound and more relevant to our age.

We know from science that the universe is in a continual process of change and evolution. It's not "once and done" at all. The cosmos has been expanding for billions of years. And this latest expansion may itself be part of an endless cycle of expanding and contracting of a "breathing universe." And the thousands of years of human civilization is but of a blink of an eye.

But to say this is not to say that God is not essentially involved in this magnificent process, calling forth order out of chaos, harmony and beauty out of destruction and death. Instead of creating by fiat, divine command, this way of thinking has God creating by working with and through the elemental laws of nature, not against them.

In one model the pottery is finished, dried, fired and done. In the other, the pot, which is the universe, is never done.

And so one could say that God is creating just as much now as God was creating way back when.

In the ancient story of the genesis of the world, life is attributed to God. Life is the very breath of God. Without this breath, human beings are little more than dirt. It takes God to shape us, to mold us, to make us living beings.

In his book on creation spirituality, Matthew Fox (*On Becoming a Musical, Mystical Bear*) says that God “is a life-breathing presence and the process of prayer is a process of coming to realize this.” Prayer is a “radical response to life. Life is our total experience of creation and to respond to creation is to respond to the Creator.” (p. 62) Through life, God is constantly trying to breath life into us, shaping us, molding us.

“The spirit world is, in fact, revealed to us,” wrote Novalis, “it is always open. Could we suddenly become as sensitive as is necessary, we should perceive ourselves to be in its midst.” It is this awareness, that grace is all around us, that God is seeking. For we are a peculiar kind of clay; we have the ability to talk back, to argue, to resist, but also to cooperate and to be self-aware.

Being shaped and molded by God takes some effort and some awareness on our part. I like what Santanya said, that contemplation does not lie in *not acting but in living when one acts*. Contemplation is about being mindful, noticing what is happening each moment, noticing God’s creative activity in us and in the world. We need to be alive when we live it—awake to the importance of each moment.

English theologian, Austin Farrer (fair-er), contemporary of C.S. Lewis, wrote,

The skill of the divine potter is an infinite patience of improvisation. No sooner had one work gone awry than [God’s] fingers are pressing it into the form of another. There is never a moment for the clay, when the potter is not doing something with it. God is never standing back and watching us; [God’s] fingers are on us all the time. (Said or Sung)

We are constantly losing shape that God intends for us. But if we are attentive, God can mold us, change us and restore us.

God creates not in a one-time event with sheer power, it seems to me. Rather, God works with the limitations of the clay, gently pressing, endless caressing, with infinite patience of improvisation, responding to the clay as it reacts, fingers on the world all the time.

As this universe continues to evolve and change, the Sacred Presence, the Supreme Artist, imperceptibly touches all things. Looking closely, we can see in every moment God’s self-expression.

With imagination and wisdom, God interacts with the clay; some of it hard, resistant, and unconscious; some of it soft, flexible and aware. As the hymn goes,

*Spirit of the living God,
Fall afresh on me.
Melt me, mold me,
Fill me, use me.*

We can help God's creative masterpiece in our own lives through openness and a yielding to the living Spirit.

The 13th Century Sufi mystic, Hafiz, wrote about the difference between a mature and immature artist:

*The difference
between a good artist
and a great one is:
The novice will often lay down his tool or brush
Then pick up an invisible club
on the mind's table
and helplessly smash the easels and Jade.
Whereas the vintage man
no longer hurts himself or anyone
and keeps on sculpting Light.*

As the divine potter, God patiently keeps on sculpting the Light within us and all things. How does God create? How does God shape and mold the world? I say that God does this by invitation. The Sacred gently molds the world from within. Here are some more word by Hafiz that convey what I mean:

*Every child has known God,
Not the God of names,
Not the God of don'ts,
Not the God who never does anything weird,
But the God who only knows four words
And keeps repeating them, saying:
"Come dance with Me."
Come dance.*

God invites us to hear the music and to dance, to be joyfully engaged and animated with the giver and the gift of life. You know, so much of the spirituality of Western Christianity has been life-denying and not life-affirming, focusing on the next life and not this one. The remnants of that spirituality remain where things of the earth and of the flesh were seen as evil or trivial at best. It reminds me of H. L. Mencken's famous definition of Puritanism: the suspicion that someone, somewhere, somehow is having a good time.

But life is meant to be loved and cherished. In Alice Walker's book, *The Color Purple*, the main character affirms the gift of sexual pleasure: "God love all them feelings. That's some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves 'em, you enjoys 'em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that's going, and praise God by liking what you like."

Life is to be totally embraced and affirmed. We need to come to a realization that all of creation, life itself, is a gift. And Jesus' advice is that we be child-like in our joy, spontaneity and full-hearted response to creation, continually receiving the gift of each moment. In the words of T. S. Eliot,

*Perhaps it is not too late...
And I must borrow every changing shape
To find expression...dance, dance
Like a dancing bear*

When speaking in his parables, Jesus constantly used the analogy of "life" for the Kingdom of God. "God is God," he said, "not of the dead, but of the living." (Matthew 22:32) "Eternal life" or intimate union with the Creator, is what all have *now*. (John 17:2) If God creates every moment, having an intimate union with the Creator requires one to be fully present in the here and now.

We are called to grow daily in appreciation of the joys of life and to accept the grace of each moment and feel the hands of the potter upon us from within. We are to see in our every breath the breath of God. We are to be fully conscious at each instant of the wonder and beauty of creation. We are meant to recognize, in the words of M. C. Richards that "Every spoonful of clay emits light." To truly live, we are to be engaged with life. There's a quote in the Talmud that says, "In the world to come, each of us will be called to account for all the good things God put on earth which we refused to enjoy."

To be engaged with life is to live each moment as a wondrous spiritual adventure. It is to appreciate *God's evolving masterpiece*. It is to savor life's beauty and its depth. It is to be let loose on the playground, set free from fear. It is to move and sway and dance with the Creative Force of life, following its lead. It is to be renewed by the breath of God, continually shaped and molded into a thing of beauty by the Divine Potter.