

IN THE HANDS OF THE POTTER

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Jeremiah 18:1-6

Without a doubt, one of the great musicians of the past century is the one we know as The Man in Black—Johnny Cash. Johnny Cash was born in Arkansas in 1932. He was the middle of seven children. His birth name was J.R. Cash (no name, just initials). When he joined the army, the army did not accept initials as names, so he named himself John. When he started performing, he changed that to Johnny.

Today, we think of Johnny Cash as a music superstar who sold over 90 million records worldwide in the genres of country, rock-and-roll, rockabilly, blues, folk, and gospel. He has been inducted into not only the Country Music Hall of Fame, but the Rock-and-Roll Hall of Fame and the Gospel Hall of Fame.

Early on, Cash's career as a musician appeared to be short-lived. In 1968, he was 35 years old and something of a has-been. He had had billboard topping records in the late 50s and early 60s with hits such as *Walk the Line* in 1957 and *Ring of Fire* in 1963. But by the late 60s, Cash's life was in a tailspin propelled by his addition to amphetamines. He was in a rough place with his record label, he had gone through a divorce, he had been in the headlines for smuggling pills across the border from Mexico. However, by 1967, he had cleaned up from drugs and was determined to get back to the top of the music business. It was then that he proposed a concert that would change his life. He talked his label into recording a concert at the Folsom State Prison in California. This was not the first time Cash had played at Folsom. He had performed there two years earlier. His song, *Folsom Prison Blues* was a hit when it was released in 1955. The concert, and its accompanying album, propelled Cash's flailing career back to the top. The album went to number one on the country charts eventually selling three million copies. Cash would go on to play a number of concerts at prisons including San Quentin and a prison in Sweden. As a result, Cash became increasingly outspoken about the need for prison reform. He was particularly troubled by the idea that young, first-time offenders were thrown in with older, hardened criminals. As one of his friends puts it, Cash thought the prison system was broken because it wasn't fixing anybody. At the time, Cash was the most prominent voice in the nation calling for prison reform. In 1972, Tennessee Senator William Brock invited Cash to testify before the Senate Judiciary Committee's subcommittee on national penitentiaries. In his testimony, Cash spoke about the need to treat newly released prisoners as human beings and to keep young offenders out of prison if at all possible. On that same trip to Washington, Cash met with President Richard Nixon in the Oval Office to discuss prison reform. Cash talked up the issue at his concerts and on his TV variety show. He corresponded with prisoners and would make visits to the jail near his home in Hendersonville. He would go there and play card with inmates.

Our reading for today is from the words of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah ministered to the people of Judea in the 6th century BC. In this passage, Jeremiah describes how God sends him on a field trip. Jeremiah is told to go to the house of the potter and there God's word will be revealed to him. Jeremiah complies.

In Jeremiah's day, potters would have been commonplace. They were needed in every town and village to produce jars and bottles and other ceramic items necessary to daily life. Jeremiah goes to the potter's house and finds the potter at work at his wheel.

You've heard me mention this before, but my daughter for many years has worked in clay. She throws pots, she makes figures, and more. And I've learned a lot about the process from listening to her. To throw a pot properly, you must get clay centered on the wheel. If it is not centered, then, as you begin to pull the sides of the pot up, the clay will wobble and collapse. At that point, the potter must take the clay and start over. The clay is not thrown away. It is still good. It is just reused and reshaped.

As Jeremiah observes this potter at work, he realizes that we are like the clay in God's hands. God is the potter and we are the clay. And sometimes the clay doesn't conform to the shape God intends so God must rework the clay into something different—a different vessel.

And this is where we normally leave this metaphor—that God makes and re-makes the clay until a final product emerges—a good vase or jar that pleases God. This is how my daughter does her ceramics. When she has achieved a shape that pleases her, she sets it aside to be fired in the kiln. The firing process turns the soft, malleable clay into something hard and unchanging.

I would like to suggest something different—that God is like a potter but God is not seeking a finished form for the kiln. God continues to work that clay into different shapes with different functions throughout lives.

I would hate to think that at some point in my life that God would be finished with me, that I would not change any more, that I was like some porcelain doll on a shelf.

I believe this reading from Jeremiah tells us that God's is constantly shaping and reshaping us for different tasks. As people of faith, we need to ask ourselves, what vessel is God shaping me to be?

I started off talking about Johnny Cash—a man whose life clearly was reshaped many times over. One of the turning points of his life was the concert at Folsom Prison in 1968. Not only did it cause his celebrity star to shine brightly, it also made him a recognized advocate for prison reform.

Johnny Cash died in 2003 at the age of 71. Cash was a man of faith. Did he recognize God moving him and using his celebrity to care for the prisoner as Jesus had commanded? Cash was himself an imperfect vessel. But did that make him a better advocate for the imprisoned? In an interview with 60 Minutes a decade later, Cash confessed that he saw himself in the eyes of the convicts. He knew that he was only a few bad decisions from being in their place. As John Bradford put it 400 years earlier as he watched a group of prisoners being led to execution, “There but for the grace of God go I.”

How is it that Johnny Cash came to give that concert at Folsom? Turns out, it was the suggestion of his pastor. Cash lived in Ventura, California, and attended church there and became close friends with the pastor, a man named Floyd Gressett. Rev. Gressett counseled inmates in the state prison system, including Folsom. Because of Cash’s song *Folsom Prison Blues*, he suggested to Johnny that he perform a concert there. The men would like to hear him. Cash played an unpublished concert in 1966 and then returned in 1968. The rest is history.

The prophet Jeremiah tells us that not only are we the work of God’s hands, we are all works in progress. Part of our responsibility as people of faith is to identify what we believe God has shaped us to be, not just right now but tomorrow, next year, and the years after that. Has God formed us to be disciples, or servants, to assist the needy, to visit the prisoner, to champion the plight of the marginalized? What vessel has God ordained each of us to be?

And how is it that we discern God’s plan for us? Prayer, reflection, listening to the people around us, being open to seeing God’s hand in your life. That is one of the purposes of the church—to surround ourselves with people who can offer us support, encouragement, and guidance on God’s path no matter how imperfect we may feel.

In scripture, we can find many examples of imperfect vessels called by God to do God’s work. One of these is the apostle Paul who explains in one of his letters that because of his earlier persecution of the church he was not fit to be called a disciple. I’m going to close with his words. He tells these people, *For I am the least of the apostles, not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am...*” (1 Cor. 15:8-10). By the grace of God, we are who we are and who we will be. Amen.