Have you ever thought about what Play-Doh might teach us? Years ago when I taught three- to five-year children with Head Start, one of our favorite activities was playing with Play-Doh. Sometimes we even made our own from flour and water. Children who had a hard time sitting suddenly became focused as they rolled out various shapes: snakes, balls, bowls, pancakes.

If they didn’t like what they created, they could smash the Play-Doh and start all over again. Some of the children in my class faced difficult challenges in the lives. As I watched the children create and smash Play-Doh, I thought about how our lives are filled with times of creativity and times when it feels as though we have been smashed by the difficulties of life.

I imagine the prophet Jeremiah had similar thoughts as he watched a potter molding clay into pottery.

The potter nods to Jeremiah, his visitor, but keeps on with his work. He reaches into a container at his side and pulls out a lump of moist, brown clay. He forms it into a ball, and throws it down upon the wheel. The potter adjusts its position—making sure it’s exactly in the center—then begins pumping the foot pedal.

That ball of clay begins to spin: faster and faster, until it’s just a blur. Then, the potter wets his hands and places them on either side of the spinning mass. Gently, he applies pressure. The clay responds to his caress as though it were a living thing.

Before Jeremiah’s wondering eyes, that lump of clay takes shape. First, it grows taller and thinner. Then, it narrows at the base. Next, the potter places his fist on top of it and presses downward—his hand vanishing into the whirling mass, as he hollows out the inside. Removing his hand now, the potter wets his fingers once again, and presses in on the outside wall of the spinning pot. As though responding to his very thoughts, a lip forms at the top of the vessel.
That lip leans out, further and further, until the whole mass of clay begins to wobble.

Suddenly, the whole thing collapses, turning inside-out. The potter stops his wheel from spinning. At the center is just a mass of clay again—although in shape it still displays some vague outline of the bowl it almost became, before disaster overtook it.

In some trades—like carpentry or weaving—the ruin of a project would be cause for despair. Yet, clay is a highly forgiving medium. The potter simply moistens his hands and picks up that mass of clay once again, forming it into a ball. He slaps the ball down upon the wheel, centers it, and sets it to spinning again.¹

Jeremiah had been trying to understand God’s connection to the terrible things that had been happening to God’s people, and by watching the potter Jeremiah had a Clay Day—a day when he caught a glimpse of how God might shape humanity.

Maybe Jeremiah had recalled the imagery from the creation story in Genesis, how God created humans from the dirt of the earth, forming life from the muddiness of the world. Maybe Jeremiah felt his own life was feeling muddy—as many of us might feel even yet today.

The prophet felt inspired to walk down to the potter’s house to make sense of their smashed lives. Life had been going well for God’s people, that is, until the Babylonians arrived and began carrying away people from their homes to the land of Babylon about 500 miles away. Today we know this time period as the Exile, which lasted for about 50 years, but at the time they had no idea how long they would be away from their homes.

Jeremiah tried to understand this event by imaging God as a potter who could create nations and destroy them, just as a potter creates shapes from clay and then smashes them. The imagery might have made sense to Jeremiah, but I’m a bit troubled by the imagery. Jeremiah, do you really think God destroys nations and people’s lives? I
mean, how can I trust in a God that would intently sense chaos and muddy times into my life? We all make mistakes in life, and if God’s response is to make our lives even muddier, then how could I ever learn to trust in this God?

This question was a deep theological issue in Jeremiah’s time, and it continues to rumble around in our minds today as well. If God loves us, why do bad things happen? Jeremiah’s response was to imagine God shaping evil against Israel to shape them into better people, but I would like to argue a bit with Jeremiah. On the one hand, I agree that God can shape our lives into better ways, but on the other hand, I would never suggest that God sends evil into our lives to shape us.

Sometimes we find ourselves being shaped by the unhealthy choices we make, but through the hope of God and the care of those around us we can find ourselves being shaped in amazing ways, as is the case with drug addicts in Georgia who find their way to the Potter’s House on a 550-acre farm in Atlanta. The Potter’s House is not a craft barn selling pottery, but a barn-like structure where the lives of people are shaped though healthy choices. Men whose lives have been smashed—not by God—but by the forces of addiction find a chance to reshape their lives in better ways. The Potter’s House contains classrooms, offices, and a chapel, offering those with broken lives a place for education, training, and worship.

Disciples’ pastor Rochelle Richards from Sumner Christian Church in Washington explains that there is no waste in the Potter’s House. The potential of all humanity rests in the idea that God does not create waste, God recycles! There are people who have tough times in life and they may feel that they cannot make it any longer. But God does not create waste. Fortunately, God is ready and eager to take what is broken and fix it; what is wounded and heal it; what is defiled and cleanse it; what is bitter and sweeten it; what is impure and purify it; what is incomplete and make it whole; what
is ugly and turn it into something that is beautiful.³

Isn’t that the core of the Christian message—that when Jesus found himself broken and bruised, that God somehow shaped new life from the tomb? God amazingly formed hope from the clay of despair. God didn’t require that Jesus had to suffer in order to love us, for God had been loving humanity for countless generations. In the midst of the terrible forces that led to Jesus’ death, God offered a Clay Day by reshaping death into new life.

Clay Days continue to happen even now. I think of all the children and youth and adults who gathered this morning to celebrate the Sunday school kick-off. As we gather on Sunday mornings to explore stories from the Bible and figure out how they related to our lives, each week we have a Clay Day as teachers and participants mold new ideas from what they hear. Adults and youth and children shape new understandings of God as they talk about their experiences, read stories from the Bible, ask difficult questions, and ponder together the kinds of questions that Jeremiah thought about as he stood and watched a potter shaping a lump of clay.

God continues to shape our lives in ways with love, and together we are partners with God in those Clay Days of shaping one another’s lives with words of hope. May you continue to celebrate the Potter’s work around the globe and here in this very place.

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1 Homiletics, September 2013
2 http://www.atlantamission.org/the-potters-house