

SERMON
First Lutheran Church
Aitkin, Minnesota
November 13, 2016

Isaiah 64:8
Psalm 37:23-26
John 6:22-40
Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen

KIDS' MESSAGE

Kids, I want to show you some **totem poles** that I carved when I was in elementary school. There were lots of cowboy and Indian shows on television when I was a kid. The native people had totem poles standing in their villages. I thought carving totem poles would be fun, so I tried. I started with a stick of wood and gradually carved them to look like totem poles. My totem poles are different shapes and sizes.

I didn't get very far. Carving poplar sticks with a pretty dull knife wasn't easy. And I didn't exactly know how to make human faces and bodies. I tried to paint this one with model car paint. Not too good. Pretty soon, I gave up on trying to carve wonderful totem poles. It was too hard. And I wasn't very good at it.

Kids, our Bible verse for today says, "**Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.**" Kids, do you know what that means? It says that we belong to God, that we are a part of God's family. And it says that God is always moving to shape our lives. God is like a potter who takes a hunk of clay/Play doe and turns it into a beautiful bowl, or pot, or statue... It says that God is always moving to shape us into beautiful people who can be proud to be children of God, happy with ourselves, and ready to help God make the world and other people's lives better.

And dear kids, God is not like me. I gave up trying to make beautiful totem poles because it was hard work and they didn't turn out as well as I had hoped. God never gives up on shaping our lives and families, hopes and dreams into beautiful and precious gifts for us to enjoy and to share. Every day, dear friends, God is moving to help you and this world to be the best that we can be. And, even if we don't measure up to God's hopes and plans for us, God keeps loving, caring and calling us forward into each new day. I am so thankful that God is shaping each of you and all of us into wonderful children of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ADULT MESSAGE

Change. On opening day of deer season, last Saturday, I sat in a deer stand along the edge of an old hayfield just outside of Aitkin. These many years later, nature is reclaiming that farmer's field with weeds, brush and trees. Trumpeter swans, once nearing extinction, flew, honking noisily, overhead. And just last week, I watched from the window of our house as a bald eagle, perched in a tree, scanned the lake for his lunch. Eagles did not do well with DDT and other pesticides back in the sixties and seventies. Now they have returned in large numbers. **Change.**

Watching the results of last Tuesday's election for President of the United States, I would expect that half of our people are **happy** and half are **sad**. Some on both sides are **worried**. Some on both sides are **hopeful**. My own hope and prayer **before the election** and **now since**, has been, "**God is still God for all of us.**" Many selected their candidate with hopes of a "**change**" in how things are going in our country and in their own lives.

This country and we as individuals have faced and still face many potential changes. We are getting a taste of **climate change**. Many have **lost jobs**. Many have lost their **homes**. Far more have lost **significant others** to **divorce**. Every one of us has lost **loved ones to death**. Someday, we ourselves will **also die**. Elections, climate change, divorce, even death – **none** of these is the **end of the story where God is involved**.

In our text from **Isaiah 64:8**, we hear this assurance. "**Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hands.**" The prophet Isaiah shared this **hopeful word** on the **heels of a long lament**. The book of Isaiah was written by several different prophets over a period of some 200 years. God had saved God's people, the Israelites, and brought them into a rich and beautiful land to dwell and prosper. However, as you may recall Israel's history, they kept forgetting about God. They kept forgetting that everything they possessed had been gifted to them by God. They kept trying to make their own way in the world without God in their lives. The book of Isaiah paints the picture of **God finally turning God's back on them and letting them go their own way**. Rich getting richer, poor getting poorer, widows and orphans neglected in the streets, cheating in business, foolish alliances, warfare, defeat, shipped off into captivity and exile – this became Israel's story. Along the way, through various prophets, God **promised a Messiah**,

gentle and suffering, who would rescue them from their sinfulness and their enemies.

Our passage for today comes after many chapters lamenting the desperate plight of Israel as it wandered through history alone. **“Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.”** These words come to celebrate Israel’s seeking of **God’s help**, Israel’s return to **faith in God**, Israel’s **coming home** to their Creator and God. After all of Israel’s **trouble**, **lack of faith**, **running from God**, finally she was **back in God’s embrace**. There, they saw their **hope**. They saw their **truth**. They saw their **salvation**. They placed their lives and their nation **back into the hands of a loving, hopeful God**. **“Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.”** Despite our own sinfulness, despite the troubles in our nation, we are still the children of a loving God. **God is still God for all of us**. We just **need to believe that** and **live like it’s true**.

There I sat in a deer stand on a 60 degree November day. The coldest part of the day always comes just before the sun comes up. The more we see of the sun, the warmer the day generally becomes. There was the farmer’s field being reclaimed by the woods. My life has changed dramatically since the first time I hunted deer as a teen. Our world has changed dramatically. **But my God, our God is faithful to us through it all**. God is the potter. We are the clay. And God is always moving to bring about the best good in our lives, in every life, and in this world. We may feel like we live in a **cold, dark world, but God is still God**. **Jesus**, the **Son** has come and is living, moving, bringing life and hope among us.

God is the potter. We are the clay. How is God shaping the Body of Christ in this faith family gathered here today? How is God shaping you as a part of this church? Our nation is divided politically. Our world is racked with war, famine, refugees and hunger. What can little old you or I do to make a positive difference? **Alfred Nobel** was known in his day as the **“Dynamite King”**. He was seen as the supplier for devastating weapons of human destruction. When he realized how the world viewed him, he used his wealth to found and fund the **“Nobel Peace Prize”**. Do you suppose God had anything to do with shaping swords into plowshares, war into peace?

John Newton was the captain of a slave-trading ship that stole hundreds of Africans away from their homeland and families and carried them to

slavery and death. When Newton came to faith and left the slave-trade business, he wrote the most-beloved song about salvation, “**Amazing Grace.**” Do you suppose that God was a part of this change in his life?

God is the potter and we are the clay. How do you suppose God is moving to shape your life and mine toward **deeper faith** and **faithful service** to God and neighbor?

How is God shaping the Body of Christ that gathers in and through this faith family at First Lutheran? How is God moving to bring about the best good **for us and for all** through our work together at First? Our theme for this fall’s stewardship emphasis is, “**God is the Potter. We are the clay – Sculpting our church with community, compassion and hope.**”

As I sat in my deer stand, a red squirrel came toward me in the distance. In his mouth, he held something brightly colored. Soon I could make out that it was a small corn cob, bright yellow kernels and red cob. He would lug the cob a few feet, set it down, dig a hole in the leaves, put something into the hole and then recover it. I finally figured out, at each stop, the squirrel would pull loose one kernel, bury it and then go on to the next stop. He was about the business of **making provision for the coming winter.** Rather than hide the whole cob in one place, he was spreading his bounty all along the trail. Watching the squirrel about his industrious work made me wonder, “**What sort of provision am I making for my future?** What sort of **provision am I leaving along the trail that others may discover and benefit from?** And **what provision are you leaving** for your own future, and for others who travel this life’s trail with you?

Do we believe that this is **God’s world**? Do we believe that **God is the potter** and **we are the clay**? If that is true, what is our role in God’s world? We are the work of God’s hands. We are the apple of God’s eye. We are beloved sisters and brothers of Jesus. And we are the vessels that God is sculpting to carry God’s love, forgiveness, healing and renewing power into every life. We are **sometimes broken vessels**, but we are **still chosen by God.** We are sometimes broken vessels, but we are **still used by God** to do God’s good and gracious will in Aitkin, the USA and the world.

God is the potter. We are the clay. God is our Father and we are the work of God’s hands. What would you like to see your life look like? What would God like to see your life look like? What would you like to see our

church/the Body of Christ that gathers here look like? What is your plan for being a part of the Body of Christ here?

Each of us has been created as amazingly unique, with a whole list of:

- Hopes and dreams,
- Passions and talents,
- Struggles and challenges,
- Doubts and fears,
- Faith and courage,
- Words and deeds.

How has God been a part of shaping you? How is God moving to shape you right here and now? How will God be shaping you, me and us together?

What do you **want our church to look like**? How do you want our church to impact upon this community and the world beyond? Should we **just keep the doors open** and the bills paid? Or, should we make a **Godly difference**? **Long ago**, the **people of this church** decided to make a Godly difference. Today it is **our turn to decide what kind of a church we are** and **want to be**.

There are lots of unanswered questions about which way our country should and will be heading in the coming year. Our world is changing. We live in a real world where **God's people are badly needed**. What about First Lutheran? We share a rich history of love and caring, of welcome and acceptance, of compassion and mission. How will we be church together in 2017? **How far will God stretch us?** **How will we be shaped by the potter's hands?** **What amazing things will God do** here and through us?

Next week in worship, we will share stories of what kind of a Christian **community/family** First Lutheran is. The following week, we will share stories of the **compassionate work** that goes on in and through this place. The final week, we will share stories of the **hope that God gifts** to each and to all of God's precious and beloved children. Come and see how God is shaping us right now.

Here in this place, God is the potter and **we are the clay**. Together we pray and work for **God's kind of change**. Thanks be to God. Amen.

