

**“Sometimes the Living Springs  
of God Are as Clear as Mud”**

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of  
St. Andrew’s United Church

for Sunday, September 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016

Scripture Readings: **Jeremiah 18:1-11**

**Luke 14:25-33**

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

There are a few touching scenes that capture life that is full and fulfilling yet also relaxed, creative, and soul nurturing.

Baking cookies with grandma was one of those moments for me, and I am sure remains a rewarding exercise for both grandma or grandpa and child today, even though as one mother said to me recently:

“I spent yesterday baking cookies with my five-year-old son. It would have been far easier, and a whole lot less messy, to do it by myself, but I think we both gained a lot by the exercise.”

Being involved in any artistic or creative endeavour works for others – from canning beets to making jam to painting to quilting to knitting to woodworking. The event and activity is not as important in itself as is the opportunity to relax and unwind while doing something worthwhile.

And today’s reading from Jeremiah uses an image that has become synonymous with creativity and wholeness – the potter’s wheel.

Now the story is not so soothing and relaxed as one might expect, and the truth is, I have learned from potters that pottery is not always so smooth and direct either.

There are times when the work on the potter’s wheel does not go as planned, and the potter takes the item being created and starts all over – a lump of clay on the wheel to be shaped into something new. That may be the secret not only to this image in the Bible, but to the story of Jesus’ curious statements about family and traditions.

We cannot love our family and our possessions and follow Jesus. We need to set them all aside to be a follower of Jesus.

The message seems clear, yet it goes against the Jesus who seeks to build up people and find ways to work together.

I find his words meaningful when I see them consistent with the potter and the creativity of the wheel.

What is important in life is not to feel good when everything goes right, but to be able to start anew and find a way forward when everything goes astray.

Seems like the living springs of God's spirit can be as clear as mud.

My summer this year was much like most of the last ten summers, for it entailed a weekly or bi-weekly update on the water levels on my pond. The low level in spring was forgotten as waters rose over the late spring and early summer – first a couple of inches, then four, and finally almost 6 inches. It meant the muddy pond had enough water I could dip out water to boil for bathing and washing dishes, and certainly fill the watering can to soak the flowers before the rain barrel got filled by later rains.

Alas, this did not last, and the beavers that started to rebuild the lower damn on the stream moved out again, and the water receded to a level even below that in the early spring. A pond with clear water and lots of fish became a muddy bog filled with reeds, moss, and lily pads.

As I looked at this muddy scene, an attraction to blue herons, ducks, sand hill cranes, and not much else, I could not help but think that God's truth and revelation to us is often like the bubbling brook or clear stream that turns to mud and silt, and we wonder what happened.

But as Jeremiah tells us, and as Jesus reminds us, life is not about where are things going perfectly, but how do we handle disappointments.

The Buddhist tradition has a whole spiritual teaching around the muddy pond, I learned this week. In one of the Buddhist sacred texts, it states: "The spirit of the best of people is spotless, like the new lotus in the muddy water, which does not adhere to it."

The lotus, I am sure many realize, has been a symbol of new life, spiritual purity, and wholeness. Yet the lotus often blooms and sits on a pond surface where the seeds at first dropped into the muddy abyss below, yet the mud and dirt of the bottom of the pond does not diminish the beauty of the lotus flower.

As one writer put it, if the water of the pond represents our thoughts, emotions and desires, then the mud and slime in the pond represents how these become clouded, blocking us from having a clear perception of our most pure self. The muddy pond also may represent our conditioning from earliest childhood, obeying certain rules and falling into specific expectations.

Maybe the muddy pond and the lotus speak to what Jesus was saying. We should not allow our lives to be formed and decided by outside forces, even within our own families, but we need to find our own destiny as we have been placed on this earth.

Masaru Emoto puts it this way: "If you feel lost, disappointed, hesitant or weak, return to yourself, to who you are, here and now, and when you get there, you will discover yourself, like a lotus flower in full bloom, even in a muddy pond, beautiful and strong."

Yesterday I was chatting with a fellow at an art show, and when he learned I was a minister, he asked what I was speaking about today. I mentioned the title, inspired, as I

have said here, by the muddy pond on my camp property. He said: "But the purity of the water can always return – the mud does not have to be the only story told." Clearly he had a Buddhist enlightenment perspective, whether he knew it or not.

Pastor Bruce Hempel ministered to thousands over his lifetime, yet the simple task of climbing the steps into the pulpit was nearly impossible for him.

Bruce had one leg, having lost a leg due to the complications of diabetes, and his ill-fitting prosthetic leg never allowed an easy stride, making it especially difficult to go upstairs.

He often said he was a difficult person to live with, and his family confirmed that the pain and hardship he faced indeed made that true. Yet he was always there for people in the congregation, as he was present for others during a long and distinguished career as a military chaplain.

One of his most memorable sermons was on 2 Kings 5:1-19 about the healing of Naaman, afflicted with leprosy, who went down to the dirty Jordan River and bathed in order to be healed. As Pastor Bruce put it: "I can identify with Naaman. After all, who would want to go down to a muddy pond where seven ducks were swimming around in order to bathe to be healed."

So there it is. Muddy Ponds are not signs of despair but the reeds that grow in them and the water lilies that come to life in such locales are reminders that life is present when we turn to the spiritual presence of God no matter what we face.

No potter always makes a perfect pot every time the wheel is spun, and no family has perfect children despite what they might think and hope for, but in the confusion and uncertainty and reality of life, we can find a way forward that is nurturing and gives life if we are open to learn and to grow.

Why, even the lotus and water lilies bring their beauty to a muddy pond. And we are so thankful that they do.