

MODERATOR'S SERMON based on the FELLOWSHIP OF MEN CONFERENCE THEME 2023: "We are crafted into the potter's perfect plan for a mission" based on Jeremiah 18:1-10

Various greetings...

Congratulations FOM, on your theme choice. I was praying for a message for this theme and so I pray that God will speak to us in a special way for such a special occasion for which you have left your homes, your busy schedules and your important roles. The text that you have chosen exposes us to the beautiful and timeless image of a potter on the wheel, and God saying to Jeremiah: "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel" (v.6). Three things the Lord may be saying to us from this loaded text:

- Every vessel has a purpose.
- But vessels have flaws.
- God wants to re-mould flawed vessels for God's use.

1. EVERY VESSEL HAS A PURPOSE/MISSION

If you understand your God-given purpose, your mission, you will be effective wherever you are.

Clay pots are made for different purposes. Some clay pots are made to withstand intense heat. Others are made to withstand heat for long periods, such as the pots that cook trotters or a poitjie for five hours. Understand that God made you for a purpose that may require you to withstand times of intense heat, sustained trouble or suffering. Then you can hang in there knowing that it is your season of being "troubled but not destroyed" (2 Cor 4:8-10), knowing that because of the heat you will produce lasting virtues, characteristics and results which can never be produced in times of joy alone.

Some vessels are made to store water, so they must be watertight and not have any cracks or holes in them in order to fulfil their purpose. When you are required to be righteous and be a good example to those around you, you are that vessel – a vessel of righteousness. The world is hungry for people who stand up for what is right, people who are models for the younger generation, people who know that righteousness comes at the cost of popularity, but will choose righteousness anyway.

Other vessels have to carry heavy contents and so they need thick walls. If you are a leader of anything you need to ask God to give you such a thick skin in order to fulfil your calling as a leader. Any type of leadership role needs a thick skin – from leadership in the home, to church leadership, to political leadership. If you are running a business today in our kind of economies and markets, you will give up and run away from your business if you don't develop the kind of thick skin that gives you the courage to diversify or find solutions for the weak areas of your business.

Other vessels are made to carry pot plants. They must have holes drilled into the bottom so that they nourish the plant and drain off excess water. If you are not able to drain off negativity from your mind you will drown your God-given mission and it will die. You have to be able to hear what is said, then keep the good and the useful, while draining off the discouraging and the demotivating words – especially if you want to continue to serve God in anything.

I believe the most enviable vessels are the ones that are made for décor. Their job is to just sit and be admired. What an easy job – it's certainly better than being made for intense heat. But the reality is that even the décor vessels suffer from dust and suffocation, in the same way décor people

suffer from a sense of meaninglessness, loneliness, a sense of no purpose or even depression. So sometimes we envy the decoration people not knowing about their real struggles.

All vessels are needed, so there is no need for vessels to compete with one another. In fact, when all of us vessels are fulfilling each of our God given callings, then we are stronger together because then we each take our place and leave no gaps in the mission God has given us. So it's not about 'competing' but 'fulfilling' our purpose – all of us - together.

2. VESSELS HAVE FLAWS

Jeremiah made the interesting observation that the vessel that the potter was shaping from the clay was "marred in his hands" meaning that we can be in God's work or under God's care yet be flawed or imperfect. As vessels ourselves we have various types of personalities that differ from one another, and each of those personalities are useful for fulfilling God's purposes. However, each type of personality has a shadow in much the same way that any object can be beautiful in the light but it still carries a shadow behind or beside it. This shadow side is what needs to be re-moulded by God the potter so that we can be fit for God's use.

Because of our 'shadows' we create the various ills in our churches and societies even though we are Christians – the abuse of others, lack of compassion, corruption, broken relationships, rumour mongering, dysfunctional families and other ills.

The Enneagram is one of many types of personality tests and it describes nine different personality types among people with the understanding that a person can be a combination of one or more of the personality types. The useful thing about the Enneagram is that it does not hide the shadow side of each personality type – the side that needs re-moulding by God the potter. Let us examine each personality and allow God to do the job of re-shaping us for His use.

PERSONALITY TYPE	THE BRIGHT SIDE	THE SHADOW SIDE THAT NEEDS RE-MOULDING
1. REFORMER	They understand the difference between right & wrong – principled – reliable – can be perfectionists. Martin Luther of the Reformation	Judgmental. Moralistic/Legalistic. Then they discover that they're not perfect themselves.
2. HELPER	Compassionate – in tune with others' needs – doers - generous – church ministers love helpers because they are so useful.	Pride – inner or outer. Anger – inner or outer, when unappreciated.
3. ACHIEVER	Success-oriented. Excellence. Driven. Need them on your team/committee	Competitiveness which kills unity. Have a superiority complex.
4. ARTISTIC	Creative – emotional – introspective. They are an asset everywhere they go.	Envy/jealousy of others. Temperamental – hot/cold.

5. INVESTIGATOR	Observer, Analytical. Perceptive, Knowledgeable. Business world needs them.	Secretive; may surprise you. Critical, and withdrawing. You can't win with a criticizing person.
6. LOYALIST	Security-oriented. Responsible. Realists. All levels of governance need them, from families to governments.	Worrying and a paralysis of analysis. Extremism is their weakness. More committed to ideologies than to the Holy Spirit.
7. ADVENTURER	Enthusiasts. Jack of all Trades. Seek variety and new things. They are vessels of abundant life, and they keep life exiting.	Can be unfocused. Many incomplete projects at all.
8. CHALLENGER	Activist type – justice – fighters. Needed everywhere for revolutions. Like the Apostle Paul.	Control/power issues. Bruising to others. Can become the evil they are fighting.
9. PEACEMAKER	Harmony – avoids conflict. Objective of all sides – mediators. Can make good spouses or parents. Needed in the church.	Passive aggressive. Inner anger. Like a duck that glides smoothly on the water but paddling hard underneath the water.

One of the most spiritually mature things we can do for ourselves and for the church is to be able to identify your own shadow side because the spiritually blind will always cause damage as they relate.

3. GOD WANTS TO RE-MOULD FLAWED VESSELS FOR GOD'S USE

God showed Jeremiah that God the potter is in the business of remolding a vessel if it does not fit into God's use for it. If you will allow it, God will re-make you, re-form you, re-mold you for his use.

This involves re-centering. When doing pottery as a child, I discovered that the clay becomes disfigured when it has moved from centre of the wheel. So the potter has to clump it all together, pick it up, and re-centre it. The clay can only be molded into the perfect vessel when it is in the centre of the wheel. We can only be useful for God's mission when our centre in is in the will – the will of God, and not our own will, our ego or our personal desires. As a church and as a people, we will do wonders when we allow God to re-centre us accordingly.

Re-molding also involves subtraction. We grow spiritually more by subtraction than by addition. We have plenty theological knowledge, information, training, structures etc available at our fingertips. What we need is for God to subtract the pride, the hatred, the joylessness, the love of conflict, the lack of compassion for others, the unkind words, the disloyalty, the lack of self-control and the power hunger that exists even in the church today. Then we become useful for God's use.

Re-molding involves heat – it is a necessity. The claypot, once molded, is not complete without going into the hot oven for a protracted period. No heat, no usefulness. While most pots need a day in the oven, the special porcelain pots of Japan take one week in the oven in order to reach perfection – and when they come out they are worth thousands of dollars.

Re-molding also involves submission – another necessity. The pot has to submit to the process of being molded, shaped, cut and heated. If it decides to skip a process it will never become a useful pot. We have to learn to “submit to God, resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” When we submit to God, it is often not fun, but the end result is for our benefit and the benefit of God’s mission.

Re-molding means saying with the Psalmist: “Search me... test me...” (Psalm 139:23-24) because when you pray this prayer God will surely re-mold you and lead you in the path of fulfilling your mission.

God is clear that the choice is yours. If you choose to be re-molded by God then God “will relent and not inflict on it the disaster...” (v.7). If on the other hand you decide to be stubborn then God “will reconsider the good...” (v.10). Let us each allow God to mold us for his use. Let us each take our place in the purposes and mission of God for this church and this society, Then we will be stronger together, each one different, but collectively powerful for the fulfilment of God’s mission. May God bless us with the desire to be molded by God for God’s perfect purpose and God’s perfect use wherever God has placed us.