

Sermon Notes – May 28, 2017

“An Origami Life”

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- Last Sunday, I began a series called My Five Favs. The idea is, in five Sundays, to talk about my favourite Bible readings – passages that I think tell us something significant about the nature of God and about the life of faith.
- Last week, I started with Micah 6: What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God. It felt a bit like cheating, because Micah 6 is on practically everybody’s list of five favs. I had some things I wanted to say about Micah 6, but I don’t think anyone heard anything surprising last week.
- Today’s reading from Jeremiah, in which the prophet goes down to the potter’s house, is also fairly well known, but probably isn’t on a lot of five fav lists. It’s on my list because I think it tells us something important about the nature of God, the meaning of existence and how to conduct ourselves within that existence.
- There’s a story – possibly even a true story – about a university campus on homecoming weekend ...
- That’s a story about adapting to circumstances, and that’s what today’s reading is about too. We can learn a couple of important concepts from Jeremiah’s visit to the potter’s house. The first is that we have free will.
- Remember, Jeremiah watches the potter at his wheel. Well, let’s update that image a few centuries.
- Let’s say that Jeremiah takes his daughter to her origami class. When they get there, the teacher is just finishing the last few folds of a paper crane ...
- There, a paper crane
- Jeremiah’s daughter starts to fold a crane, but it doesn’t work out ... She unfolds the paper and starts again.
- This time she decides to make something simple ... a sunfish
- I’m a bit like that, says God. If a nation I’m trying to work with doesn’t behave properly, I’ll destroy it – I’ll unfold it and start over again.

- The implication is that God doesn't know which way things are going to go – God has to wait and see what happens. The paper could be folded one way or another, good or bad, according to how it behaves – the consequences of its actions.
- To be perfectly honest with you, the idea of free will is not a Biblical constant. Consider Psalm 139, which says,
 - “O Lord, you have searched me and known me. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.
 - In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.”
- The idea there is that the complete biography of our lives, including our obituary, is written in full before we are even born, and God knows how everything is going to turn out.
- To be serious about our faith, one of the ideas we have to get used to is that the Bible sometimes contradicts itself. It would be astonishing if it didn't. It was, after all, written by dozens of different authors over a period of 1,000 years. And it contains stories that are 1,000 years older than that. What makes the Bible a treasure – and it is a treasure – is not that speaks with one unified voice, because it doesn't. What makes the Bible a treasure is that it is a 1,000-plus-year-long record of one people's struggle to understand just what I want to talk about in this series – the nature of God and how to live a faithful life.
- For myself, I choose to believe that we have free will. The alternative, from Psalm 139 and other places, is that every choice we make has already been made for us. We are simply actors on a stage, following a script that, unknown to us, has already been written.
- I have no great theological underpinning for believing in free will. I just find the alternative to be so depressing I can't bear to believe it.
- Some will say, well, maybe God hasn't decided what we're going to do next. Maybe God just knows what we're going to do. God exists outside of time and therefore knows what's going to happen, knows what choices and actions we are going to take, even though we make them of our own free will.

- Maybe. But that brings us back to Jeremiah 18 – Jeremiah and his daughter’s origami class. God says, I will change my mind about what I intended to do. That’s a future that hasn’t been decided yet. That’s a universe of unknowns. That’s a world of real choices and consequences both intended and unintended.
- That’s a world of possibilities, and yes, it’s full of hurts and sorrows, but it’s also full of joy and wonder. That’s a world I can live in. And maybe I am just looking through the Bible to find a verse that supports what I want to believe, but I can tell you this – if that verse didn’t exist, I wouldn’t be here as a preacher today.
- Okay, the nature of God is that God created a world that God does not completely control, that things change, and that God can be surprised by how things work out. The nature of existence is that we have the ability to make choices freely, but then we have to live with the consequences of those choices, for better or for worse. And that brings us to the life of faith.
- “I will change my mind,” says God. I intend one thing, but if it doesn’t work out like I thought it was going to, if circumstances change, then so will I. I will change my mind.
- This is a big move away from the all-powerful, all-knowing God that we often think the Bible talks about. And this isn’t the only passage in which God is presented this way – being as curious as we are to see how things play out, to know what the future will hold.
- In Jeremiah’s daughter’s origami class, we learn more than origami. We learn the meaning of free will, which is that nobody knows what will happen next, until it happens. We learn the answer to the question, How could God let that happen? How could God let a child die of cancer or a whole village be wiped out by an earthquake or a tsunami? My answer to those questions – and remember, this is about my favourite readings and what they mean to me – my answer is that God is not in charge, that God doesn’t decide who gets sick and who doesn’t. That God is as shocked and saddened and angered by such things as we are. My answer is not that God protect us, but that God strengthens us, that God accompanies us, that God runs and skips when we do and God gets down and crawls through the mud with us when that’s how our life is going.

- Not everyone is comforted by that image of God, but I am. And sometimes, like in the old poem, there's only one set of footprints because God carries us when it seems like we can't go any farther.
- If I'm right about this – if you're still with me – this means that God doesn't have a plan for our lives, as the TV preachers say. I believe that God has hopes for our lives. Life being what it is, sometimes we fulfill those hopes and sometimes we don't. When we don't, God says, I will change my mind, and God devises a new hope for us. That's why we say that every cloud has a silver lining. That's why it people say, It could be a lot worse, and why it seems that some good comes out of every situation.
- That's what it means when we say that God forgives. I'm not saying we escape the consequences of our actions, because we don't. I'm saying there is always a new hope, a new best choice, a new direction in which to go.
- Jeremiah 18 is on my five favs list because it defines our relationship with God – defines it as a relationship, an interactive relationship. So the life of faith isn't like being a player on a stage, saying lines and doing dance steps that are already laid out for us.
- Instead, life is more like a beach volleyball game. Two players, you and God. If you go this way, I'll go that way. Sometimes you make a great play; sometimes all you get is a mouthful of sand.
- And that's life – one fold, one pelican, one sunfish at a time. Thanks be to God.