

***Message: “Like Clay in the Potter’s Hands”***

**Lysa TerKeurst, author of NY Times best seller Uninvited, wrote about a time when her personal life was coming apart.** She said, “We live in a broken world where broken things happen. So it’s not surprising things get broken in our lives as well. But what about those times when things aren’t just broken but shattered beyond repair? Shattered to the point of dust. At least when things are broken there’s some hope you can glue the pieces back together. But what if there aren’t even pieces to pick up ...? You can’t glue dust.

**It’s hard to hold dust.** What was once something so very precious is now reduced to nothing but weightless powder even the slightest wind could carry away. We feel desperately hopeless. Dust begs us to believe the promises of God no longer apply to us. The reach of God falls just short of where we are. And the hope of God has been snuffed out by the consuming darkness all around us.

**We want God to fix it all.** Edit this story so it has a different ending. Repair this heartbreak reality. But what if fixing, editing, and repairing isn’t at all what God has in mind for us in this shattering? What if, this time, God desires to make something completely brand-new? Right now. On this side of eternity. No matter how shattered our circumstances may seem.

**Dust is the exact ingredient God loves to use.** We think the shattering in our lives couldn’t possibly be for any good. But what if shattering is the only way to get dust back to its basic form so something new can be made? We can see dust as a result of an unfair breaking. Or we can see dust as a crucial ingredient.

**Think about a plain piece of ice.** If the ice stays in a cube, it will always be just a square of ice. But if the ice melts it can be poured into a beautiful form to reshape it when frozen again. Dust is much the same; it’s the basic ingredient with great potential for new life.

**Of all the things God could have used to make us, God chose to use dust.** “*God formed [us] out of dirt from the ground and blew into [our] nostrils the breath of life. [We] came alive - a living soul.*” (Genesis 2:7, MSG).

**Jesus used the dust of the ground to restore sight.** Jesus said, ““*While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.*” After he said this, he spit on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and smeared the mud on the man’s eyes’ (John 9:5-6). After the man washed in the pool, he saw.

**When mixed with water, dust becomes clay.** Clay, when placed in the potter’s hands, can be formed into anything the potter wants to create! Jeremiah and Isaiah teach us, ‘*Lord, you are our God. We are the clay, you are the potter. We are all the work of your hand*’ (Isaiah 64:8).<sup>1</sup>

**Disappointment taught Lysa how to trust God.** We all can learn from her life and faith. The good news of Jesus gives hope to all people, and all of creation. Sadly, far too often, the message is drowned out in a cacophony of negativity. We’re immersed in a world seeking to break us down, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

**What hope do we have?** We aren’t God. We can’t do what God does. There’s an old joke about human arrogance. One day a group of scientists got together and decided humanity had come a long way and no longer needed God. So they picked one scientist to go and tell God they were done. The scientist went and said, “God, we’ve decided we no longer need you. We’re to the point where we can manipulate atoms, build molecules, fly through space, and do many other miraculous things, even cloning people. So why don’t you just go away and mind your own business from now on?”

God listened very patiently and kindly. After the scientist was done talking, God said, “Very well. How about this? Before I go, let’s say we have a human-making contest.” To which the scientist replied, “Okay, we can handle that!”

“But,” God added, “we’re going to do this just like I did back in the old days.”

The scientist nodded, “Sure, no problem” and bent down and picked up a handful of dirt. God wagged a finger at him and said, “Uh, uh, uh. Put that down. Make your own dirt.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.guideposts.org/inspiration/inspiring-stories/stories-of-faith/lysa-terkeurst-how-disappointment-taught-her-to-trust>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ipost.com/blogs/through-a-glass-darkly/gods-dirt-386925>

**Carl Sagan reportedly said,** “To really make an apple pie from scratch, you must begin by inventing the universe.”<sup>3</sup>

**Humor aside, there comes a point in life when we must decide whether we trust God or not.** More head knowledge doesn’t help. More meaningful and compassionate work won’t get us there. It’s not a matter of what we do, but who we are! Faith and hope are rooted in love.

**And love comes from the heart.** This kind of love isn’t the I’m-excited-in-this-new-relationship love. It’s love lasting years, decades and millennia after the honeymoon phase. The love God has for us grows and changes as we change and grow. After all, we aren’t the same today as we were during the pandemic or even before this dark time. We’ve matured and grown. We’re learning new ways of faith, just like a musician learns new songs.

**God’s love isn’t bound by anything we can comprehend, even death.** A verse we often hear during funerals applies to our lives, here and now: “*Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?*” (1 Corinthians 15:54-55).

**We find our greatest hope when we put our faith and trust in God.** With God on our side, nothing can overcome us. We become a new person. We are free to shed our old self, with its bad habits and misbehaviors, learning new, life-changing and life-giving habits and ways of living. God invites us to co-create our new lives, becoming more like Christ while staying true to who we are.

**What freedom this gives us!** This is what lies at the heart of the potter and clay. The potter doesn’t work against the clay. A good potter works with the clay to produce the best results. And God is the best potter of all time.

**Paul’s letter to his friend Philemon gives us a great example of how God works in our lives, changing us for the better.** Together, we read the first part of the short letter. We read about the hope, faith and encouragement Philemon and his congregation gave Paul.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

**Because of their faithfulness, Paul makes a bold, timeless appeal:**

“... I ... appeal to you through love. I, Paul ... appeal to you for my child Onesimus. I became his father in the faith during my time in prison. He was useless to you before, but now he is useful to both of us. I’m sending him back to you, which is like sending you my own heart. I considered keeping him with me so that he might serve me in your place during my time in prison because of the gospel.

However, I didn’t want to do anything without your consent so your act of kindness would occur willingly and not under pressure. Maybe this is the reason Onesimus was separated from you for a while so you might have him back forever - no longer as a slave but more than a slave - as a dearly loved brother. He is especially a dearly loved brother to me. How much more can he become a brother to you, personally and spiritually in the Lord!” (Philemon 8-16, CEB).

**There are amazing lessons in Paul’s letter.** I see ways we can apply them in our lives, our home, workplace and certainly in our ministry. Paul didn’t tell them what to do. He didn’t use his position, power or authority. He’s empowering them, while making his hope clear in an encouraging way. Paul acknowledges there was a problem. Onesimus ran away, which means he could be punished. But, in the meantime, his life has changed by faith. The potter worked with the clay. Onesimus isn’t the same person he was before. He’s serving the Lord in a such a way Paul hates to let him go. We get the sense Onesimus wants to go back home, make amends and be with his family and community of faith. Not as a slave or prisoner, but as a brother. Through faith, lives are changed, families healed and communities restored. Praise God.

**This is a message for each of us and for our community today.**

We don’t have to be slaves to whatever binds us. We can face our addictions, self-centeredness, doubt, anxiety, and the fears which can rule us, making us defensive, distant and demanding. We can admit our flaws, our hurt feelings and insecurities to ourselves, to God and to each other. Let the potter work with the clay. Truth is the antidote to fear. And trust is the way to go. Trust God, believe in Jesus and respond when you’re prompted by the Spirit. **Let us joyfully sow seeds of faith so lives are drawn to God.**

Let us pray:

*Lord, help me to be the person you want me to be today. Take away the desires that shouldn't be there, and help me be single-minded in my focus and my pursuit of you. Help me to follow you and be transformed by your love so I may bless others with the same love. Bless us when we live generously, sharing your love with others, passing our blessings on. We commit ourselves to you in faith and in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

### **Jeremiah 18:1-11 (CEB)**

Jeremiah received the Lord's word: Go down to the potter's house, and I'll give you instructions about what to do there. So I went down to the potter's house; he was working on the potter's wheel. But the piece he was making was flawed while still in his hands, so the potter started on another, as seemed best to him. Then the Lord's word came to me: House of Israel, can't I deal with you like this potter, declares the Lord? Like clay in the potter's hand, so are you in mine, house of Israel! At any time I may announce that I will dig up, pull down, and destroy a nation or kingdom; but if that nation I warned turns from its evil, then I'll relent and not carry out the harm I intended for it. At the same time, I may announce that I will build and plant a nation or kingdom; but if that nation displeases and disobeys me, then I'll relent and not carry out the good I intended for it. Now say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem: This is what the Lord says: I am a potter preparing a disaster for you; I'm working out a plan against you. So each one of you, turn from your evil ways; reform your ways and your actions.

**Philemon 3-16 (CEB)**

May the grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Philemon, I thank my God every time I mention you in my prayers because I've heard of your love and faithfulness, which you have both for the Lord Jesus and for all God's people. I pray that your partnership in the faith might become effective by an understanding of all that is good among us in Christ. I have great joy and encouragement because of your love, since the hearts of God's people are refreshed by your actions, my brother.

Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to command you to do the right thing, I would rather appeal to you through love. I, Paul - an old man, and now also a prisoner for Christ Jesus - appeal to you for my child Onesimus. I became his father in the faith during my time in prison. He was useless to you before, but now he is useful to both of us. I'm sending him back to you, which is like sending you my own heart. I considered keeping him with me so that he might serve me in your place during my time in prison because of the gospel. However, I didn't want to do anything without your consent so that your act of kindness would occur willingly and not under pressure. Maybe this is the reason that Onesimus was separated from you for a while so that you might have him back forever - no longer as a slave but more than a slave - that is, as a dearly loved brother. He is especially a dearly loved brother to me. How much more can he become a brother to you, personally and spiritually in the Lord!