

The church I served previously hosted a music conservatory in its building. One of the faculty members at that conservatory, the harp teacher, was married to a man who was a violin maker. His name was Will Stapp. When I first met Will, he had just finished a Master’s degree in violin-making.

During that program, he studied the work of other violin-makers. He learned various techniques. He played dozens of different violins. He watched other craftsmen at work. His thesis – instead of writing a paper – was to construct his own violin.

I brought Mary-Austin’s violin today. This is a half-size child’s violin, but I brought it so that you can see the intricate work that goes into a violin. The first thing Will did was to choose the wood for his violin. He used maple for the outer edge. The front, the back and the neck are often spruce. Will Stapp, this violin maker I knew, selected the materials and over many, many months, he carved them to exact detail. He planed the wood so it would bend just so. He glued each piece into place. Then he carved the sound holes so that just the right melody would escape. It took Will five years to make his violin. Each piece was painstakingly done. The sound post was added, and then the neck and the bridge put into place. He hand-carved the scroll on the neck. And then, after five years of work, Will Stapp, this violin maker, added a half-dozen or so coats of rich varnish, put the brass piece in place, and strung the strings.

Can you imagine? Five years to make a violin.

And then, Will played his violin. To his great dismay, to his tremendous sorrow, the violin made an awful sound. Maybe the wood was too thick or the sound hole was wrong or the strings too long by just a tad. The instrument was all wrong. Five years in the making, and his creation was worthless. Five years of work, for nothing.

And, so, Will, the violin-maker, carried his violin to his workshop. He removed the strings, dismantled the brass, took a hammer and smashed the violin to bits.

His creation was flawed, and so he destroyed it.

Our scripture passage for today has a similar story. Jeremiah, the prophet, lived in Israel about 600 BCE. All around him, the people of his nation were all out of kilter -- they were like a violin that wouldn’t play, if you will. They lusted for power, they abused the little people, they forgot their holy calling.

**“Smashing Violins”
Jeremiah 18:1-11**

**Rev. Timothy B. Tutt
Sunday, September 9, 2007**

And in the middle of this, God told Jeremiah to go to a potter's house. Jeremiah went and saw a potter spinning a pot on a wheel. If you've ever seen a potter at work, you know they shape the mud in their hands, holding it evenly, so the pot is perfectly formed. But as Jeremiah watched, this particular pot got lopsided, out of kilter. If the potter continued, the bowl would be lopsided. So, the potter smashed the clay down and started again.”

Jeremiah saw this potter smash the clay, and God said to Jeremiah, “I can do the same thing with my people that the potter has done with the clay. The people are lopsided, they're like a crooked pot, so I may have to smash down the clay and begin again.”

Let me say here, that this is a troubling picture of God here in this passage from Jeremiah. It bothers me to think of God sitting around waiting for people to do something wrong so that God can squash us like a lump of clay. If it were the only idea of God I had, I think I would give up on God. So, it's important to remember that, while Jeremiah has this picture of God, there are other portraits of God in the Bible as well. The very first time we see God, in the Book of Genesis, we see a loving Creator. The prophet Isaiah tells a story of God as a Mother singing to Her children. Then there is that remarkable simple sentence in I John – “God is love.” So, don't let this snapshot from Jeremiah be your only picture of God.

This entire passage about the potter and the clay is about something else anyway. This passage is really about hope. For just as quickly as God says to Jeremiah, I may break down my people, God goes on to say, but if they change their ways, “I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. I will build them up.”

God's people are headed in the wrong direction. They are like a violin that won't play. They are like a misshapen pot. But it's interesting to see what the potter does here – yes, the potter presses the pot back down into a lump of clay, but then the potter goes right back to work, reshaping that mud into a new pot. The potter takes the same clay and begins again. To me, that is the hope for our lives.

No matter what you've done in your life and no matter what has happened to you, you can begin again.

Some of you know Gerald Mann, who was the pastor at Riverbend Church. The first Sunday of every year, Gerald Mann preached the same sermon. The title of that sermon was, “You can begin again.” He preached it over and

over because he it was something people needed to hear -- you can begin again. It's the truth.

Sometimes you and I do really dumb things. We lie. We cheat. We act like crybabies. We pout. We treat other people poorly. We are selfish. We hurt other people. We fight with our family members. We falsely accuse others. We're stingy with our money. We hurt others and we hurt ourselves.

The Good News is that those things do not define us. You can begin again. It's not easy, but you can begin again. Yesterday, September 8, was the anniversary of the hurricane that destroyed Galveston back in 1900. The city was completely destroyed. Today, September 9, is the anniversary of the day the Galveston city leaders decided to rebuild. They constructed a sea wall, raised the entire wall seventeen feet, and started over. You can begin again.

Sometimes, the troubles of our lives are not the things we do, but the things that are done to us. Sometimes the pain of our lives is beyond our control. Maybe the doctor gives you bad news. Maybe its mental illness or alcoholism in your family. Or your company laid you off. Whatever has happened to you may be terribly painful. Here's the hope – you can begin again.

Two of the spouses of current candidates for president have given us examples of that. Ann Romney is the spouse of Republican Mitt Romney. Elizabeth Edwards is the spouse of Democrat John Edwards. Mrs. Romney has multiple sclerosis. Mrs. Edwards has a terminal form of cancer. Both women have said their diagnoses gave them options. They could sit home and be sick. Or, they could move forward with their lives and try to make the world a better place for others. They both chose moving forward. They both said that illness would not crush their hopes. They both chose to begin again.

That can be your choice, too. You can begin again.

Back to Will Stapp, the violin maker. He worked for five years building his violin. And when he played it, it was flawed. And so he took the violin to his workshop. He removed the strings, dismantled the brass, took a hammer and smashed the violin to bits. His creation was imperfect, and so he destroyed it.

Do you know what he did then? He went to the wood shop and selected more wood for a new violin. He started over. He began again. He sawed and

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he fitted. He curved and he planed. He glued and he varnished. And built a new violin.

One day I was sitting in my office at my previous congregation and Will and his spouse knocked on the door. He was holding his new violin in his arms, cradling it like a child. And he asked if he could play it in the sanctuary of that church. He had played it in his shop, but he wanted to hear how it sounded in a large room with good acoustics. Of course I said, “Yes, if I could listen.”

And so we went into that sanctuary. The lights were off, and the early afternoon sun trickled through the stained glass windows. Will took his new violin, his new creation, his new creation, and he stood in the center of the chancel area. His wife sat on the second row on the left. To offer them some privacy, I sat about 15 or 20 rows back on the far right.

And Will took his new violin, and he tucked in under his chin. He smiled at his wife, then closed his eyes. He lifted the bow, and he ran it across the strings. And he played. He played, and this glorious, full, rich sound filled the room. It was the sound of a violin, but it was more than that. It was the sound of a second chance. It was the sound of someone who had failed but was brave enough to try again. It was the sound of new life. It was the sound of hope.

Amen.