

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

September 14, 2019
Community Prayer Service

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Potter *by* Steve Garnaas-Holmes

Potter God,
center me in the wheel of your grace.

As the world spins around me
lay your strong, wise hands on me.

Cup your creating fingers around me
and draw me up into your image.

Press upon me, steady, firmly;
let me feel you pressing,

let struggle be my making, pain my art,
your thumbprints on my soul, my flesh,

caressed into the shape of you,
molded to your knowing, your delight.

And if I lose the shape you will
smush me down into my lump

and shape me up again, anew, and
unafraid to be so pressed to beauty.

The sucker punch. I have seen it one too many times in my home as my teenage sons suddenly turned into 5 year olds. Waiting for that moment when they could catch the other off guard, when they could inflict just enough pain at just the right moment to produce a loud, irritated scream from their brother. And then, it was inevitable...the chase would ensue, around the house like a herd of buffalo. Angry at being punched. Wanting the satisfaction of revenge. Feeling a little embarrassed that they were caught off guard.

Whether it's from someone you know – when you get a literal sucker punch; or if it's the figurative kind of punch - the sucker punch of life that sidelines you when you thought everything was going so well. The event that knocked the wind out of you, caught you off guard, rerouted your life.

I remember one of my worst sucker punches...when my former husband was re-diagnosed with a brain tumor. We had been separated for a year. Things hadn't been good for a while. Life had been falling apart for months. I remember watching my husband slowly unravel and become someone very different from the man I had married. He didn't seem right. His decisions were off, often not making sense. He was strangely impulsive and often didn't tell the truth. In and out of the hospital, diagnosis after diagnosis. The doctor's said it was depression. They said it might be some other mental illness. They said it will get better with the right medication and the right treatment. It never got better.

Out of self-preservation, we parted ways. It was the only way I could navigate raising our children in a healthy, happy environment. And then, a year later...the sucker punch. I got a call at work. He had had a grand mal seizure. In fact, I found out he had been having mini-seizures for over a year but hadn't said anything about it. It was cancer. A return of brain cancer after a 25-year absence. As much as we thought it would never return, it did. Suddenly, it all made sense - all of the problems we had been experiencing. And, then, the guttural moan of reality hit and the only sound I could make was this deep, primal sound of pain.

I let out a loud wail. I couldn't breathe. We had been living in such a state of confusion for so long and now I understood. Life was never the same. Sometimes, I wonder how I got through that punch that came out of nowhere. But, I did. We all did. I can only explain it as grace.

When I read our opening poem for this evening, I thought of that punch. When all we have built, when all of our dreams are broken right before our eyes and we lose our shape and are smushed down into a lump of nothingness.

Have you ever watched a potter working on a wheel? The meticulous precision, the patience, the ongoing attempts to get it right. At times the clay will rise up beautifully, with the potter's hand expertly crafting out of the damp clay a perfect curve, a gentle arch, and then suddenly, the form falls. You might describe it as sinking because the clay will often melt down into some primitive looking mass unrecognizable from the form that had just been present. And then, the potter in a moment of resolve, smushes it down, presses into the wetness, taking away the form and structure that once gave definition to this mass of clay. And, he starts over.

Slowly, the wheel will start to turn again. Wise hands begin to create again. Steadily, firmly, they press into the clay rebuilding something stronger, stronger from the knowledge of how it had been weakened just moments before.

The potter's wheel is for me the reminder that the sucker punch is never the end. We may be caught off guard, we may have thought we had it all together, we may feel defeated by failure or sickness or divorce or job loss. We may cry out in that primal way when we find ourselves in a lump of despair.

But our faith calls us forth and says put yourself in the center of God's wheel. Decide to grow from the punch. Allow yourself to be vulnerable to the spinning as you allow God's strong, wise hands to form something out of your pain.

I love the words from the poem...Cup your creating fingers around me and draw me up into your image. Press upon me, steady, firmly; let me feel you pressing, let struggle be my making, pain my art, your thumbprints on my soul, my flesh, caressed into the shape of you, molded to your knowing, your delight. And if I lose the shape you will smush me down into my lump and shape me up again, anew, and unafraid to be so pressed to beauty.

If I have learned anything, it's that the reshaping takes trust. It takes trust to allow God's movement to press upon you and raise you out of the pain you have gone through into a place of beauty. It takes trust to center yourself on the wheel and ride with the rising and the falling of life. When you feel the fall, when you experience the punch, close your eyes, imagine God's hands pressing down upon you. Rest there. Take a breath or two or three. However long it takes and then feel God's hands lifting you back up, reshaping you into something stronger, more resilient, more beautiful.

Amen.