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# On Pottery

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# ON POTTERY

## MARK TERRY

One of my life's most poignant moments came during my first lesson at the potter's wheel. I'll never forget how my teacher laid his hands over mine and helped direct the pressure needed to guide the clay into center. That moment when the clay 'found' center was absolutely electric. It tickled my innermost being in much the same way as feeling the faint kick of our first child in my expectant wife's womb. Life yet-to-be-born was announcing itself!

From that day when I first felt center I have been—at my core—a maker, a shaper of clay. Every time I sit at my wheel, in a modest yet incredibly powerful way I am privileged to reenact the Genesis story as I take this most unpretentious of all media—raw earth—and breathe into it both life and purpose.

I am never so happy as when up to my elbows in clay. Why is this? At one level, when deep into making, I know I am doing what God created me to do. I feel a kinship with the famous runner Eric Liddell, who said so well in the movie, *Chariots of Fire*,

“... God also made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure.” I believe that artists are blessed in a oneness with their Maker as they give birth to new work. There is something special about bringing substance out of void that provides hands-on insight into the meaning of “Word made flesh” and unique intimacy with our Creator. When approached from this mindset, the work we do becomes a special kind of prayer—the prayer of incarnation.

Creating in clay also has its own sense of liturgy. Each session begins with ritual preparation, as clay is wedged and body seeks the balance necessary for the act of centering. In the best of work, there is listening, as the artist seeks oneness with the medium during the shaping, each telling the other where it wants to go. And, of course, there is the waiting. Waiting for the clay to dry, for the kiln to climb to temperature, for the fire to animate glazed surfaces, and for all to cool down again and appear as finished work.

With regard to ‘incarnational prayer,’ while there is a handful of better-known directions for artists in Scripture, it wasn't until later in life (having been raised in evangelical traditions) that I discovered the intertestamental book, *The Wisdom of Yeshua Ben Sira* (or merely Sirach). Greek Church Fathers called this work “The All Virtuous Wisdom,” and Sirach is included in the Septuagint as well as the biblical canon of both Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions. Here is what the rabbi has to say about makers:

So every craftsman and workmaster that laboreth night and day, he who maketh graven seals, and by his continual diligence varieth that figure: he shall give his mind to the resemblance of the picture, and by his watching finish the work. The noise of the hammer is always in his ears, and his eye is upon the pattern of the vessel that he maketh. He setteth his mind to finish his work, and his watching to polish them to perfection. So doth the potter sitting at his



work, turning the wheel about with his feet, who is always carefully set to his work, and maketh all his work by number. He fashioneth the clay with his arm, and boweth down his strength before his feet: He shall give his mind to finish the glazing, and his watching to make clean the furnace. All these trust to their hands and every one is wise in his own art. Without these, a city is not built.

And they shall not dwell nor walk about therein, and they shall not go up into the assembly. Upon the judges' seat they shall not sit, and the ordinances of judgment they shall not understand, neither shall they declare discipline and judgment, and they shall not be found where the parables are spoken: But they shall strengthen the state of the world, and their prayer shall be in the work of their craft; applying their soul, and searching the law of the most High (Sirach 38:27-34, DHV).

In this passage, the rabbi claims that the work of makers defines the very essence of civilization. Further, he asserts that our work is too important for our time to be *wasted* on such things as governing. Rather, our work is considered a prayer so important that it serves to “strengthen the state of the world”! The work of our hands then is a special kind of communion with the Ultimate Maker. As such, we are active participants in the work of keeping the fabric of civilization intact.

Not long ago, noted artist and author Makoto Fujimura visited my community to lead a lively discussion about our responsibility as “caretakers of culture.” Pitted against the daunting

might of Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and social media, I have little faith that I have the means to bear much influence on our culture. However, God’s word promises that every time I shape clay, I engage in the powerful prayer of incarnation—the work of my hands plays its role in culture care. This knowledge drives me to my studio. It reminds me of that first magical spark that set my creative pursuits into motion but, more impressive, that even the most humble tea bowl has its part to play in maintaining the state of our world.

Mark Terry M.F.A., M.Ed. is a Professor of Art at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon. A three-decade veteran educator and long-time Chair of the Department of Art & Design, Terry teaches Art History, Ceramics, Sculpture, and Senior Thesis to undergraduates. Widely exhibited, his artwork can be found in a number of collections and galleries.