

If you use a smartphone you've probably discovered that you can ask it just about any question and immediately get a fairly detailed, if not necessarily nuanced, answer. One brand recently advertised that feature with a commercial showing someone accidentally spilling a whole canister of sugar into what was supposed to be a savory sauce; instead of just scooping the sugar back out of the bowl, the frazzled cook asks the phone what to do. The digital assistant suggests adding different ingredients to turn the sauce into cookies, then walks them through it step by step. I have engaged in some rescue missions in my kitchen, but I've never gone from pasta sauce to cookies, so I will say that commercial portrayed artificial intelligence—for all its potential issues—doing what doesn't always come naturally to real humans: shifting gears, thinking outside the box, starting over, trying something new and creative. For all humanity's progress, technology, even revolutions, we tend to resist change for as long as we can. Think of how each generation's music is regarded with disdain and even suspicion by previous generations until it becomes familiar enough to be considered mainstream. Thank you, by the way, Central musicians, for Friday's halftime show, for playing the marching band arrangement of the music that my parents complained about when I was in high school; you were awesome. But it will be awhile before your music hits the 50 yard line. Maybe it's the instability in our world that makes us yearn for familiarity and predictability and the way we've always done things, so much so that sometimes, even when we know something's not working, we just keep doing it, in fear or because we can't see a better vision. Thankfully God, who created everything out of nothing, is much more flexible and dynamic than we are.

In our first reading, the Lord shows Jeremiah a potter taking clay from a spoiled vessel and reworking it into something else—something that seemed good to him. One of the most common ways we misread the prophets is by individualizing their images. So we take verses like *I know the plans I have for you, plans for a hope and a future* and we embroider them on pillows and gift them to high school graduates and that's lovely, but that's not the context in which they were written. The prophetic books begin with God convincing the prophet to be a prophet, because nobody wants that job, but after that, the word of the Lord is addressed to the whole community, to bring the whole nation back to life as God intended it. God had given the people of Israel a law and a land where they were to live differently than other nations, in compassionate, cooperative community: God alone was to be their king so they would not suffer the injustice that comes with a ruling class. But the people said, nah, we want to be like everyone else, and we want a king like everyone else, and we'll risk being exploited on the off chance that we get to be some of the ones doing the exploiting, and...their society goes to pieces, just as God said it would; so God sends the prophets to get them to change their ways. But remember what we said about change; the people never willingly do it. So the clay in the potter's hands is like the nation of Israel, and while the Lord is not going to abandon them or throw them out, just as the potter isn't throwing away the spoiled clay, the Lord is going to re-work them from the mess they've made into something good. I don't know if you've ever watched someone throw a pot or repurpose clay when their project gets too wonky to salvage, but it's not a gentle process.

When we read the prophetic critique of ancient Israel or apply that critique to our own society, it's tempting to excuse ourselves from responsibility for the collective mess—especially the big, global problems that started before us and will continue after us and require sweeping, large-scale solutions. *I'm only one person, so my actions won't make a difference; I know this system is bad, but I'm stuck in it like everyone else; I disagree with this, I didn't vote for this, but I'm not the one with the power to write or enforce the laws.* And honestly, we all are at the mercy of some circumstances that are beyond our control. But whereas we might think of ourselves as helpless and hidden in the crowd when the prophets speak to the whole group, Jesus narrows that communal word and speaks very personally to us as his followers.

*Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even life itself cannot be my disciple...* What happened to the *love your neighbor as yourself* Jesus? I want that guy back. This sounds awful, it would have sounded even worse in Jesus' own day, when it was practically impossible to survive outside the support of the extended family. We know that people of faith have excluded, rejected, even been violent to others, including family, using God or religion or a particular interpretation of scripture as justification. That's not what Jesus means here. Jesus is more likely borrowing what would have been familiar language from the Old Testament: Jacob didn't hate Leah, but he loved Rachel more. Jesus doesn't want us to hate anyone, but to love him more: to follow his example, to invest in his way of life more than in the life anyone else tells us to lead. Because Jesus' values of mercy, compassion, generosity, and selflessness are countercultural, and because Jesus calls us to treat all people that way, not just our families, our allegiance to Jesus' way of living may, and probably will, challenge and change even some of our dearest relationships, so Jesus wants us to be aware of what discipleship may cost us.

*None of you can become my disciples if you do not give up all your possessions.* Ouch. But the problem with our possessions is that we don't just possess them; they can also possess us. Our lives are shaped by who and what we hold on to, and by who and what has a hold on us. This is Jesus' invitation to freedom, to let go of whatever might be holding us back from the abundant life that God intended for us. Jesus, who at this point in Luke's gospel is making his way toward Jerusalem, warns us that following him means carrying the cross, because he is about to carry the cross. Unlike some early Christians, we are fortunate that carrying the cross will only ever be a metaphor for us, but there are still aspects of our lives that we don't want to see die, even though we know they are not consistent with Jesus' way of life. Yet there is no resurrection without the cross; new life only comes *after* death.

Whether as individuals or as a community, whether we think of it as resurrected life through the cross or as the good vessel that the potter reworks from what was spoiled, we are always being called to more fully experience the life God envisions for us. God's vision is very different from most of what we see in the world around us, maybe as different as cookies and spaghetti sauce. But unlike the AI voice on the phone, we know we can trust the One who is calling us into that new life. May God free us from whatever has a hold on us and re-form us into people who love Jesus' way of living most of all.