

“A Rough, Passionate Kiss”

Text(s): Jeremiah 18:1-18

- Pastor Ken Nelson

Steve Bailey was known as the “*Candy Man*” of Hershey, PA. His official title was Chief of Inspections at Hershey Candy Company's “kiss division”. Steve had about 20,000 Hershey's Kisses pass his inspection every 60 seconds! Life magazine once called him the “*maestro of the Kiss*.” His job was to search for anything less than sheer chocolate perfection. But his job was not as difficult as the numbers suggest. He admitted that most of the 1,200,000 Kisses that passed him every hour were already perfect by the time they reached him. Not surprisingly some pieces didn't meet the specifications that are required of a Hershey Kiss. Then as now a Kiss is exactly 15/16 of an inch in diameter at the base, has a smooth appearance, is not leaning to the side, and above all the curl at the top isn't either standing up too straight or drooping too low.

Kisses that fell short of these lofty chocolate requirements in Steve's exacting eye would be picked out and sent to a process called, “*the rework*.” They were melted down and mixed with new pre-hardened candy, and the process of becoming a Kiss started all over again, continuing until chocolate perfection was reached.

700 years before the birth of Christ, when he paid a visit to a local potter on the command of the Lord, Jeremiah would not have seen millions much less dozens of specimens of clay on a conveyor. With vessels of clay it was one at a time in a process that took time. Potter's work was hard work. Your whole body went into it. A potter's wheel was made of two stones connected by a vertical wooden axle. The potter would kick the lower stone to create speed and then brake the stone to slow it down, exerting, sweating, throwing on the upper stone a pot, and throwing himself into the making of the pot.

Given all this hard work, you didn't want to waste your effort or your materials. For that very reason some potters cut corners. They would throw a pot, let it harden, and if they discovered cracks they would fill them with a mixture of dust and water. It lasted only a while of course before daily use caused it to decay. The mixture had not been worked in, it wasn't part the whole.

“Behold, the potter was working at the wheel. And the vessel that he was making of clay was spoiled in the hand of the potter. So he made it over, reworking it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make it.” The potter at the wheel was a striking visual object lesson. It illustrated how God works with his people. It illustrated moreover the distinction between the work of false prophets and true ones, and between the Lord of Israel and gods of our own making.

As with a good potter or a good candy man so with God... nothing short of intended perfection will do. For Steve Bailey, a top a bit too curled or a rough texture meant rework was the only solution. Jeremiah saw how in the hands of an honest potter, a vessel, if “spoiled,” was not patched, but remade. God doesn't look the other way, and doesn't patch. God reworks.

But let's be clear. This story is not about quality per se, as though we as Christians have attained any personal or adopted any doctrine of "perfection". No, this story is about discretion, or to use a "churchy" sounding phrase, selection. Being picked for "rework" is entirely at the discretion of the potter. Jeremiah noted that the pieces were selected for "rework", "*as it seemed good to the potter.*" The potter at the wheel is about how God works with his people, and God chooses to work beyond, way beyond our notions of merit or accomplishment or even fairness. It is our salvation, is it not, that God is not fair. It is our salvation that this master potter, this master inspector God of ours is merciful, and chooses to continue to work on, work with, and work out the salvation of we poor sinners.

In a few moments we'll sing an old hymn of the faith entitled - "Have Thine Own Way, Lord"! "*Have Thine Own Way, have thine own way! Thou art the Potter! I am the Clay! Mold me and make me, after thy will! While I am waiting, yielded and still!*"! It's a nice prayer. But how many of you are truly "*waiting, yielded and still?*" That may have been true of Steve Bailey's little candy pieces, motionless as they are carried along a conveyor belt. That may be so of an inanimate piece of clay that awaits the potter's hands. But you and me? Hardly.

Martin Luther said we sinners hear the Word of God and as that word becomes more and more real, we realize we've got some "rework" in our future. So he was adamant that we listen for the whole word of God. The very fact that we experience this process of rework is evidence of what we are...God's own workmanship. Chosen at his discretion. To be allowed by God to remain unchallenged by His Spirit, uncorrected by His Word, unchanged by his grace, would not be a blessing but a curse. The story of the Potter, a bit harsh on the ears the first time around, becomes a word of grace only when you remember that the one Jeremiah's predecessor Isaiah said was "crushed for your sins" worked over on the cross for your failures and blemishes, whose birth you're about to cheer and sing and take solace in, has in his mercy, and solely at his discretion, chosen you for eternal life. Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way. Alleluia...AMEN