

“The Seven Storey Mountain,” Rev. Dr. Mark Caggiano 9/7/25

Jeremiah 18:1-11; Luke 14:25-33

The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

The prophet Jeremiah is using a metaphor to explain what is going on, how God is working through the lives of the people of Israel. And, to be blunt, it is pretty harsh.

The potter's work has failed and needs to be reworked, reformed. For the potter, that means starting all over again using the same clay. For God, it is a bit more troubling, at least in the time of Jeremiah: *Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you, from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.*

Israel has been unfaithful and Jeremiah is calling upon the people to repent their sinfulness. They were formed in the image of God, but they have been deformed along the way, and so now they must reform. The oracles of Jeremiah are undated, but the early part of the book anticipates the troubles of the people in exile. There was a chance to repent before these difficulties, but that did not work out.

Eventually Jeremiah comforts the people by saying they must pass through a time of suffering, but they will be delivered from it by God. God imposed this suffering to bring about a change in their behavior, the reformation called for by the prophet. But it is hard to hear that this suffering came about through the will of God. Indeed, many Christian traditions describe suffering as a pathway to God.

I have my doubts as to whether suffering is required to find our way back to God. And yet, I fully agree that people can fall away from the way of God. The question is what they need to do about it, if anything. I say “if anything” because there are different ways to approach that concern.

Some believe that you were always destined to fall away from God. Others think that no matter what you do, even if you live a good life, whether you return to God was decided long before you were even born. And still others believe you are in control of your eternal fate, that you can find forgiveness through your actions and through your faith. There are many more versions of these scenarios, but I will limit myself to these three today.

I am not a fan of the first two, which strike me as fatalistic. Both rely upon the notion of predestination, with one suggesting that your sinful life was predetermined while the other proposes that your eternal suffering was predetermined. I think rather that we are to live our lives with purpose, that life is a gift of God to be embraced. I also believe that we are all ultimately destined to return to God – whether that return will seem like heaven or hell is the question.

Today, I want to talk about a man who tried to change his life. Someone who came to understand that we are *formed* by God and that we are often *deformed* by how we live. What happens next is the true test of a life.

Thomas Merton led an interesting and contradictory life. He was an American, but he was not. Born in France, educated in England, raised by American grandparents after his New Zealander father and American mother died a few years apart. He was a Catholic, but he was also not. He

was raised irreligiously by his parents, an Anglican and a Quaker respectively. He came to Catholicism in his adulthood, after a young life of free-wheeling education. He faced family pressure to become intellectually accomplished, perhaps even intellectually perfect, whatever that meant.

He became a Trappist monk, dedicated to a life of silence, and yet once again he was not. Even after taking his vows, he was encouraged to write, to express himself as a way to respond to his struggles against the rigors of monastic life. And so, from his silence he eventually spoke volumes as a well-known writer and scholar. A scholar of Eastern religions, religions he once described as not “evil *per se* but more or less useless.” However, it is through these so-called useless traditions, such as Zen Buddhism, that he came to more deeply understand his Catholic faith.

Merton seemed to have both a strict and a permissive childhood. His mother was a stern perfectionist who wanted Merton to grow intellectually. This growth was to be in straight and tidy rows that she carefully weeded, but at the same time she wanted him to be a free thinker, somehow. Both parents were artists, the father the more free-spirited kind, who sadly could not pay the bills with his art. He became a landscaper, or perhaps more specifically a precursor to a landscape architect in the early 20th century. Due to these financial circumstances and the war in Europe, the family moved about as finances and battle lines required.

Eventually, after they moved to the U.S., his mother died of stomach cancer. He was only 6 years old and his younger brother was 3. A few years later, at 11 years of age, Merton was packed off to boarding school in France and then to university in England. His father died when he was a teenager, and Merton returned to the US and finished his college education at Columbia. Soon after he entered a monastery in Kentucky, his brother died fighting during the Second World War.

I list off this litany of sad biographical items because it reminded me of the reading from Jeremiah. Thomas Merton had turned to Catholicism as his religious pathway and the notion that suffering comes from God is a central idea. Unlike many Protestants who often believe in predestination and therefore the predetermined nature of their eternal fate, Catholics believe that we are in control of that ultimate destination.

We sin and we suffer; we suffer and we hopefully repent. It is a direct invocation of the declarations of Jeremiah and many of the prophets. It is also a theme that we can find in the teachings of Jesus. In our reading this morning, we heard that you must give up your possessions, you must do so to lay the foundation for following Jesus.

Because possessions are preoccupations. How to obtain them, how to maintain them. How to keep up with the life course that you have set for yourself. Instead, you must leave them behind. You must leave behind your father and mother: their expectations, their preconceptions, their traditions. Like the clay of the potter, you must be reformed.

The number of people who have tried to analyze Thomas Merton and his life choices is large. I will spare you most of them. One that I found interesting in light of our readings was by a scholar from the University of Cambridge, Susanne Jennings. She focused on Merton’s notion of the self, his concept of the ego to use psychological terminology. And much like the potter at the wheel, the self can be formed, deformed, and reformed.

The first self is the true self, the self created by God. The *imago dei* or the image of God within us. We are made correctly but then we get messed up along the way.

We take the wrong path, we get distracted by possessions, we take on a new image of who we think we are meant to be, which effort distorts that first, true self. We sin and we fall away from that underlying image of God we possess.

Like all of us, Merton was formed by his experiences. His mother tried to guide his growth and education with a heavy hand. She wrote in her diary about her struggles with what she called a willful child who would not follow her lead. Which is a strange perspective from someone leading an essentially Bohemian life. Merton read that diary, by the way, after his mother's death, which I am sure led to a great need for therapy.

Or, in Merton's case, a desire to turn away from the world. He became a monk at 23, after a few years of dedicated hellraising. He had embraced his *id*, to use another psychological term. He embraced his desires and sinned boldly. He is said to have fathered a child in England while at Cambridge and this was all hushed up by his guardian who packed Merton off to the US, never to see the child or mother again. Both were said to have died during the London Blitz, another tragedy heaped unto an already tragic life.

Merton became a Catholic even though his parents were both Protestants. His paternal grandparents seemed to have been actively anti-Catholic – I do not know if there was a contrarian impulse to move in the other direction. But I think there might have been another reason: the desire to have a sense of control. To return oneself to the potter's wheel.

During the Protestant Reformation, reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin turned away from the Catholic understanding of salvation through good works in the world. They did so because the church had (in their estimation) become something like a protection racket, with bishops selling indulgence to wipe away the sins of this life. Instead, Luther and Calvin taught that our eternal fates are predestined and therefore we need not worry about how we live this life. We need only have faith.

And yet, having faith would not get you into heaven or out of hell. It was simply beyond your control. As a reaction to an out-of-control system of buying and selling salvation, I can understand why this notion of predestination had appeal. But, not surprisingly, it led to a different concern, that we have no control over what happens in the next life and therefore we face lifelong anxiety with no ability to influence an unknown outcome. This is one the reasons Unitarians broke away from their Puritan forebears, this terrifying prospect of having no control over what happens to us in the by and bye.

For similar reasons, some religious traditions develop the idea of purging oneself of sin. This might be in a metaphysical space called purgatory, where we suffer so that we might eventually be saved. This might be through the process of reincarnation, with a series of lives used to train human beings to avoid attachments to this life and therefore to overcome endless suffering.

Merton converted to Catholicism, which tradition developed the idea of Purgatory. His biography is titled the *Seven Storey Mountain*, which is an allusion to Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* and specifically his poem, *Purgatorio*. Merton interpreted his life through this metaphysical lens of purging oneself of sin.

Merton was also a student of Buddhism, which teaches of the cycle of death and rebirth as a mechanism for the reformation of the self. Again, I do not want to psychoanalyze Merton, but I am guessing that he found comfort in both the Catholic and Buddhist traditions because they offered a means of attaining self-control for him, whose life had been in many respects always out of control.

In the current moment, organized religion is facing decline. Americans are far less likely to enter religious communities than in the past. Some have no sense of religious belief, but many do. They nonetheless do not see the need for or the value of being in a religious community. They call themselves *spiritual but not religious*. Spiritual meaning, I guess, searching for the divine in their own way. Not religious meaning not being tied down by a tradition, not limited by its particulars.

I will admit there is something attractive about going my own way, drawing from any and all religions and philosophies without having to pay tithes or volunteer to make coffee. Skip all the entanglements and focus on what I like, what I care about. It sounds great. And it also sounds rather lonely.

That is my charitable view.

My less charitable view is that it is an effort to avoid effort, to sidestep the hard work that is necessary to understand the world and the people around us. Yes, Jesus went out into the desert to fast and to pray for 40 days and 40 nights. But he did not stay there. There is a time for being alone, for looking inward, for finding our center. But that time is not always.

We were given this life to live it and that life is meant to be among others. We cannot live it alone – no one is capable of that. Just as we could not learn to walk or to talk or to care for ourselves without others, we were never meant to disengage from the world entirely or from one another.

There is also something worrisome about being spiritual only without the discipline of trying to be religious. If the goal is to follow a pathway to God, how will we know when we get lost? How will we know when we have settled upon a false idol or a selfish worldview?

We need other people in our lives even if we ultimately do not agree with them. We need them not because we will adopt their views, but to help recalibrate once in a while. Yes, I am still personally a liberal, nerdy follower of Jesus, but if I never speak to someone I might disagree with, I might never discover that some of my unquestioned beliefs have some significant flaws worthy of a few questions.

Merton described his upbringing as something akin to a spiritual not religious path. He wrote: “Mother wanted me to be independent, and not to run with the herd. I was to be original, individual, I was to have a definite character and ideals of my own. I was not to be an article thrown together, on the common bourgeois pattern, on everybody else’s assembly line.”

And yet, with all that desire for him to be original, Merton’s parents made their own choices about the path Merton and his brother were to follow. He also wrote, “It seems strange that Mother and Father, who were concerned to the point of scrupulosity about keeping the minds of their sons uncontaminated by error and mediocrity and ugliness and sham, had not bothered to give us a formal religious education.”

Now we might guess that this was because they thought perhaps that formal religious education was itself contaminated with error and mediocrity and ugliness and sham.

To be fair, that was and is probably true.

There is error because we can only guess at what is ultimately true.

There is mediocrity because religion, like any human creation, can sink down to the most common denominator rather than explore the heights of inquiry and speculation.

There is ugliness in religion because it can embrace itself as perfectly formed and articulated such that anything that varies from its glistening perfection is idolatry or heresy or sin.

And there is indeed sham in religion because religion sometimes puts on one beautiful face for the world and hides a far darker countenance behind closed doors.

If you read deeply into Jeremiah, you will see an ancient snapshot of this. Self-satisfied religious leaders who saw nothing wrong in their society. Who let the king do whatever he wanted to whomever he wanted. Who cheered when people became rich at the expense of the poor. Who brushed aside the rampant rejection of Biblical values. And by values I do not mean tithing and praying. I mean caring for those around them. For those in need. For widows and orphans, For the aliens and the strangers in their midst.

And you might even draw a few lines connecting what happened then with what is happening now. More than a few lines.

The imperfections in a religious tradition should concern us, but that does not mean that going it alone is any better. That grazing across world religions and cobbling together a spiritual smorgasbord is closer to what is good and right and true.

I have on occasion referred to myself as *religious* and not spiritual. Religious because I think it is important to engage with a tradition even if I do not fully agree with everything, even if I have questions and maybe a few suggestions. One of the reasons I have a fondness for Thomas Merton is that he found truth and beauty outside of his tradition, Catholicism, but that he kept coming back trying to understand what he had learned within his tradition.

When Jesus asked his followers to abandon their parents and to leave aside their possessions, it was meant to be a radical break from the past. But where you are going can only be understood as the byproduct of where you have been. Judaism, Catholicism, and Protestantism are religiously, spiritually, and culturally intertwined. And so, there is no harm in looking beyond the four corners of what is currently your religious outlook. There is no harm in looking into other traditions like Buddhism to see what other people have offered as answers to the same fundamental questions about the world and beyond. There is no harm in wandering for a time.

And yet the Greek mathematician Archimedes once said, “Give me a place to stand, and a lever long enough, and I will move the world.” All that power and all that possibility requires *a place to stand*. A place from which to look around, to measure and to compare, to have a safe harbor to return to after fruitful or hazardous exploration.

Merton’s parents were trying to prepare him for their ideal life of a Bohemian intellectualism. Sadly, they neglected to teach him about what it means to be a part of a community, to face hard questions together. To offer your children education is a wonderful thing. But to leave them

uninformed about right and wrong, good and evil, outside a community of people trying to head somewhere together is, in my opinion, a lopsided education.

And that community is not about lessons: it is about stories, it is about examples. It is about what you do in the face of tragedy, like Merton faced in his childhood. It is about what not to do when you are free from all restraint, as Merton faced at Cambridge and Columbia.

It is about what is important, not just because some dead theologian or philosopher said so. But because you saw real people laughing and crying as they navigated life's challenges and opportunities. You can't do that alone along Walden Pond. Remember that Thoreau went back home from his cabin in the woods for dinner most nights. It is better to have a firm spot upon which to stand, especially out there in the woods.

Sometimes that spot will be among family or friends but sometimes not. Sometimes it will be a religious home. A home filled with people asking the same questions if not always finding the same answers. A home filled with people of good will and good humor, with good intentions and hopefully good food.

And it is worth looking for such a place, trying one on for size. Merton became a Catholic, but he did not start out as one.

We are each faced with questions of who we will be, what we will become, and how we will move forward in this life. It is good to have people to talk to along the way. It is good to have a quiet, pleasant place to go to during that journey.

I realize that whether some places or some people are good is a question. But I am confident that finding that place and those people is important. That searching out important answers requires a religious outlook as much as a spiritual sentiment.

Again, we were never meant to walk this life alone.

And as followers of Jesus, we have a rich history to draw upon and a radical outlook if we so require. We are not limited. We are empowered even as we wander. Even as we set a lever upon firm ground from which we seek to move the world.

Welcome back to church. Amen.