

On Being Picked for the “Rework”

*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.*
(Jeremiah 18:4b)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on Fourth Sunday of Easter, **April 22, 2018**
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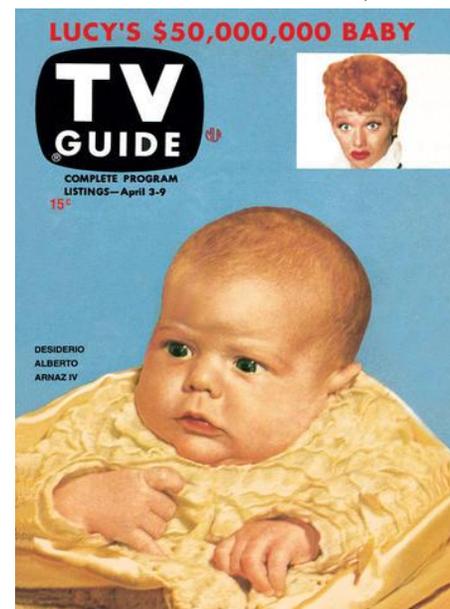
Christ of the Hills UMC, 700 Balearic Drive, Hot Springs Village, Arkansas 71909

This month marks the 65th anniversary of the launching a publication we all know well, a publication whose complete archive, if scanned at a glance, provides astute commentary on the ways our nation has been molded, reworked. I’m talking about *T. V. Guide*, the very first issue published on April 3, 1953. The cover was a chubby-cheeked newborn baby. Not just any newborn, of course, but a celebrity baby. Desi Arnaz, Jr. had been born two months earlier, January 19, to Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, their fame riding high starring as Ricky and Lucy Ricardo in the wildly successful sitcom, *I Love Lucy*.

With shows from the 50s and 60s like *I Love Lucy* one clearly sees the gradual reshaping of our culture. (Those who were here last Wednesday night experienced an excellent example of that with our version of *Leave It to Beaver*, a delightful production by Faith and Ron Heinrichs and starring our own church members with simple themes highlighting honesty and integrity, thus hearkening back to those shows).

In some ways, I suppose, we can be glad for the cultural shift. In 1953 CBS had a policy that it was inappropriate to show a pregnant woman on television and especially inappropriate, absolutely taboo, to allow the word *pregnant* to be spoken on the air. CBS at first rejected the *I Love Lucy* producers’ idea to incorporate her actual pregnancy into their story line, at last compromising by allowing the script to incorporate a pregnant Lucille Ball, but still disallowing the word *pregnant* to be spoken, preferring the less startling word, *expecting*.

The airing of the show in which the script had little Ricky being born was, in fact, on his birthday, January 19. Not a coincidence, of course, the show was timed to coincide with Lucy’s pre-scheduled Caesarean section. *T. V. Guide’s* first issue reported that the January 19 episode of *I Love Lucy* was the most watched television show in history with 71.7% of all televisions tuned in, thus eclipsing even a very important event which occurred the next morning, January 20th, when a mere 67.7% of American televisions tuned in to watch the inauguration of President Dwight Eisenhower. *I Like Ike*, but *I Love Lucy*.



I want to use a classic episode of *I Love Lucy* to introduce this theme of reshaping found in Jeremiah's Parable of the Potter. "*The Candy Factory*" episode (Episode 39 of *I Love Lucy*), originally aired on September 15, 1952, but is recognized and loved across the generations, no matter the age. (Click on the link below to re-see it.) Lucy and Ethel switch places with Ricky and Fred as the boys stay home and do housework while the girls go out to earn a living, landing a job at a candy factory.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NPzLBSBzPI>

Standing at the conveyor belt, their supervisor made it clear they would be fired if any piece of candy got by them unwrapped. At first it was a snap, the candy slowly crawling in front of them, but when the supervisor calls for the conveyor belt to pick up speed, before long the candy is rushing by in an uncontrollable cascade of sweetness. That scene – Lucy grabbing and stuffing the speeding candy everywhere she could, her coat pockets, dress, hat, mouth – has become a highlight reel fixture in the history of American entertainment.

Did I mention it was Episode 39 of *I Love Lucy*? In the *For What It's Worth* department, I find it a delightful synchronicity that this happens to be the 39th Sunday sermon I've offered at Christ of the Hills. Welcome to Episode 39!

That scene makes me think about Hershey's Kisses, a teardrop shaped candy which began as an accidental chocolate dripping during the manufacture of other chocolate treats. That happened in 1907, 111 years ago. Best guess for the origin of the name *Kiss*, by the way, is that the sound of the candy dripping was a bit like a smooch. The candy was wrapped by hand for over a decade (using employees like Lucy and Ethel), but in 1921 a machine was invented that could wrap 1300 Kisses a minute. The little plume, by the way, was added three years later, in 1924.

Today, chocolate is dripped at precisely the right weight and temperature onto a continuously running steel conveyor belt, where it goes through a cooling tunnel for 18 minutes to harden the chocolate. Hershey's has the

capacity to manufacture 60 million Kisses in a single day! I read an article about a real life Lucy-at-the-conveyor-belt inspector, a Hershey's employee named Steve Bailey, who personally gave the finishing inspection to 20,000 of those Kisses every sixty seconds! Called a "*choco Valentino*," and a "*maestro of the Kiss*," I love the picture of Steve leaning sideways with his line of sight just above a virtual sea of unwrapped chocolate Kisses, searching for anything less than sheer chocolate perfection.



His job is not as difficult as those enormous numbers might suggest. He admits that the vast majority of the one million or so Kisses that pass him every hour are already perfect by the time they reach him. But, he says, some blocks of the candy don't quite pass the specifications required. The company's expectations of what a Hershey's Kiss is supposed to look like when you unwrap it at home is high. When you unwrap a Hershey's Kiss, Steve sees to it that it is exactly 15/16 of an inch diameter at the base, that it has the proper smooth appearance, the right color and texture, that it is not leaning to the side and, above all the imperfections his trained and steady eye checks, the curl at the top can't be either standing up too straight or drooping too low.

What I found interesting is what happens to the Kisses that fall short of these lofty chocolate requirements. Steve brushes them aside to a catch-off pan where they go into a process Hershey's calls the Rework. Hershey uses the very word Jeremiah used! In Rework the defective pieces are melted down, mixed with the rest of the pre-hardened batch and the process starts all over again, continuing until they get it right.

That scenario certainly brings to mind Jeremiah's Parable of the Potter. *"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."*

In Jeremiah's time there were no chocolate factories. The potter at the wheel was the most up-to-date visual Jeremiah could use to illustrate how God shapes and reshapes his people. The potter's workshop was an everyday sight, pottery being produced at a rate that would surely rival chocolate manufacturing in our own day. Walking across archaeological sites from the ancient world, even these 2 and 3 thousand years later, beneath our feet still crunch the broken pieces of pottery. Jeremiah was teaching with relevancy, using images the people saw everyday.

There are four basic lessons learned in both my Parable of the Hershey's Kiss and Jeremiah's Parable of the Potter and Clay:



- (1) *A product is expected to attain very high standards.* Both the potter and the candy man take enormous pride in the finished product, accepting nothing short of perfection. Their work is their art.
- (2) *Sometimes, the product fails to measure up.* For Steve Bailey, the top may be a bit too curled or the outside texture too rough. For the potter, the work is said to be "*spoiled*," probably for the same reasons, the shape a bit amiss, the texture abrasive, or the color not right.
- (3) *The defective piece is selected for REWORK.* The chocolate is melted down and remixed with the unhardened chocolate. In the case of the potter, the same occurs. The clay is remixed

with the rest of the wet, soft, pliable clay where the entire process begins again.

(4) *And, perhaps the most important thing in gaining a proper understanding of God's message to us is that the selection of who is picked for REWORK is entirely at the discretion of the potter.* If Steve gives it the go-ahead, the chocolate is wrapped in bright foil and shipped to the store. If Steve doesn't like something about it, it's brushed into the REWORK and the process is started over. So it is with the potter. Jeremiah says that the pieces were selected for REWORK, *"as it seemed good to the potter."*

I told you that the first Hershey's Kiss was formed in 1907. May I tell you about something else created in 1907? Adelaide Pollard's has written the words to the hymn we know as *Have Thine Own Way, Lord*. In 1907, George Stebbins composed the music we know and love.

*"Have Thine Own Way, Lord!
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."*

How many of us, though, are really, *"waiting, yielded and still?"* That may be so of Hershey's Kisses, motionless as they are carried along the conveyor belt, passively awaiting inspection, wrapping, and shipping. Chocolate and clay are inanimate objects, by nature *"waiting, yielded and still."* Oh, it may SEEM that things have a mind of their own. I think so every time I find myself looking for a hammer or a screwdriver. I call it the *"recalcitrance of inanimate objects."* Hammer insubordination, a rebellion of my meager toolbox against my higher purposes. Yet, truth be known – the fault is mine.

The hammer is truly innocent, *"waiting, yielded and still,"* something that cannot be said of you and me. Our capacity of free will adds a complicating factor to the parable, something that parables about mushy clay and sweet chocolate cannot address. We are not conveyor belt Christians. We have minds and hearts of our own.

We are, each of us, sometimes broken, spoiled in the hand of the potter. This is not a fault of God's craftsmanship, but through the fault of chance circumstance or of poor choices. We are reminded of human brokenness everywhere our feet step, as surely as pilgrims walk over broken pottery at every archaeological site we visit. One can hear the broken pottery of human lives with every newspaper opened -- brokenness resulting from hate, violence, misfortune, or merely from age and loss. Our human story is one that leaves brokenness in its wake.

We all have times in our lives when we feel misshapen, when our lives develop a texture of which we are not happy or proud. In such times, we sense that what we are Becoming, what we are hardening into, needs to be melted down, remixed with the basics, and the process started over in the Rework. Paul spoke of this process as he wrote in Romans 8 that believers are being *"conformed into the image of his Son."*

The church's theological vocabulary is full of words that have the prefix, Re-. Re-vival. Re-birth. Re-new. Re-fresh. Re-generation. Re-store. Re-turn. Re-pent. Re-concile. Re-surrection. Re-dedication. Re-solve. This morning we could produce a virtual thesaurus of RE words. Why? Because our faith is a faith of hope and RE is the prefix of hope.

Perhaps this message catches you at a time in your life when you sense brokenness, a need to be Re-Worked in God's grace. If so, I hope these words and images will lead you to the Divine Potter in whose loving hands we are being formed, conformed to the image of Christ.