

Second Sunday of Pentecost  
June 2, 2024

Text: 2 Corinthians 4:5-12  
Theme: Treasure in Clay Jars

Several weeks ago my wife, Heidi, and I were visiting a dear family member whose significant illness was suddenly complicated by a fall and a broken ankle. During our visit we watched therapists work with a number of residents whose aging processes were complicated by illness, amputations and additional vulnerabilities. They looked so fragile and their prospects so dim. I found myself asking, how does our faith in Jesus Christ speak to us in such hard moments of life?

St. Paul was no stranger to such experiences. At one point, some attempted to stone him to death because of his persistent witness to Christ. He recalled another time when he was a prisoner on a ship being taken to Rome for trial. He and those on the ship were caught in a fierce storm that would threaten to destroy him and everyone else. Paul's physical presence was apparently anything but stunning. He would speak of having a "thorn in the flesh", some very visible weakness. He called it a "messenger of Satan" sent to harass him, a "thorn" that God would not remove from him. He speaks of "being afflicted in every way", "perplexed", "persecuted" and "struck down". Paul's opponents, some of whom presumably were Christian, would point to Paul's weaknesses and vulnerabilities as reasons to reject him as a trustworthy authority and leader in the church. He looked for all the world like an earthen vessel, a "cracked pot". What kind of a pastor can he be when he is so weak, so fragile? If he really was one who was favored by God, shouldn't he be more a person of strength, vitality and popularity?

One wonders about those who would reject Paul for such reasons. Doesn't that say something about their faith? Such faith assumes that those who are experiencing the "good life" are those who know God's present and eternal blessing. On the other hand, those who are experiencing difficulty must be experiencing something of God's judgment. Worse, if such things are happening not just in the lives of others, but also in our own lives, then aren't we in some way or another also experiencing God's judgment? So we might wonder.

Paul uses the very reason why some want to dismiss him to point to Jesus who is the center, the grounding for his hope. He acknowledges, "It really and truly is not about me. We proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord." He reminds his hearers of what God is up to in Jesus. "Do you remember the God whose word brought creation into being? The very God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

Paul will not weary of telling that story. It is the story of Jesus who in the Gospel lesson moves to a man with a "withered hand" who may be seen by some as inconvenient, vulnerable and judged. On the Sabbath day, the day set aside to remember the gift of God's creation, Jesus recreates life for this man and heals him. But some who witness this act of restoration are not impressed. Why would he do this "work" on the Sabbath day? They see Jesus as a "cracked pot". They will not be satisfied until Jesus' life is ended. From the time of Jesus' baptism, Jesus will know the nature of temptation. He will know what it is like to have his own beloved friends say "no" to him. At certain points he will be the picture of weakness. He looks like one who is experiencing not only human condemnation but the judgment of God as the crowds shout "crucify him". The Gospel that recalls the story of Jesus' healing this man will also recall Jesus crying out, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" This is the holy mystery. God's

strength, God's love, God's treasure is made known in weakness, in the crucified Jesus, whom God raised to new life.

The result, Paul says, is that "We proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord". The word, "Lord" means the one to whom all things belong. Jesus is our Lord because Jesus is the one through whom all things were made, including you and me. Secondly, Jesus is our Lord because he is the one who has taken on our human flesh our weakness and given us new life, forgiving us and claiming us for now and for eternity - no matter our present circumstances. In this Jesus we get to see the "glory of God", a glory that is for us. That is the word that was echoed at the time of our baptism. "You are a child of God, marked with the cross of Christ forever." That is the word we get to hear and receive as we receive the Lord's Supper: "The body of Christ, crucified and risen, for you."

Do you see my weakness, Paul says? Good for you! "We have this treasure in clay jars so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and not to us." If I look like a cracked pot, so be it. Our apparent weakness makes it all the clearer, that whatever we might say and do, the treasure is the story of what God is up to in the crucified and risen Jesus. That makes a difference in Paul's life-and in ours. Paul can say, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies."

Sometimes people will say to me, "Pastor, I try so hard to do what God desires in my relationships with others. But I know I don't measure up." I can say back to them. "I know that feeling. Maybe that's what Paul means when he says, 'we have this treasure of the Gospel in clay jars'. When and if we fail, as we will, it just demonstrates that we are 'cracked pots'. Our very failure indicates the treasure of a God who through the crucified and risen Lord keeps putting us back together, bringing us from death to life. And, when by the Spirit of God we get it right, it demonstrates again the glory of God made known in the face of Christ Jesus in and for us. God works incredibly through us." That changes our perspective on those around us.

"We do not proclaim ourselves. We proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake." As we watched several therapists work with the residents in the rehab center, I was struck by their joy, persistence, patience, and ability to encourage the residents. They were not treating them as helpless, hopeless individuals. They had the ability to see each of the residents as a treasure, as one who had the possibility of progress and hope. I saw in those therapists and in those in the wheelchairs something of Christ. When we know the treasure of God revealed in Christ, in the specific, sometimes difficult circumstances of our own lives, we know something of the glory of God. Those very experiences open our eyes to how God is working in us and through us for the sake of those around us, no matter their circumstances or what it might cost us. We can say with Paul, "For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh." Can we pray that "the life of Jesus may be made visible" in the earthen vessels, the cracked pots that are you and me? By the Spirit of God, indeed we can!

Submitted by Marcus C. Lohrmann