

Treasure in Clay Jars

2 Cor 4:1-12

16th century Reformer Martin Luther (d.1546) said, “*We are to be little Christs to one another, bearing each other’s sins as Christ bore ours.*” Similarly, St. Teresa of Avila (d.1582) said: “*Christ has no body on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ’s compassion is to look out to the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now.*”

When we hear Christians say things like that, I think we can be overwhelmed and we wonder, if that really can be true--true for us, true for you, for me. Even more so Paul tells us this is in life’s context of--“*afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.*” This is normal, in fact, constitutive of the Christian life. He sees in this normalcy how God’s good purpose is worked out in us as followers of Jesus; that is “*carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.*” What Paul tells us is that the difficulties and struggles of our lives--both those which come about by intentional Christ-like living, and those that come upon us for reasons known or unknown to us--are in fact key for understanding how we work out our calling as God’s people in the world, as part of God’s plan to reconcile all things in Jesus Christ.

But let’s back up a bit. In this 2 Corinthians 4 passage, Paul makes reference to two important Old Testament events. First, when he says, “*For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’*” he is quoting from Genesis 1: “*Then God said, ‘Let there be light.’*” And when he says, “*But we have this treasure in clay jars,*” (vs.7) there is an allusion to the creation of humanity, when “*the Lord God formed man from*

the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being,” (Gen 2:7). Here the light of God to which he refers to here is the Gospel that has shone into our hearts or lives. That idea of the light connects to Jesus who proclaimed himself *“the light of the world”* (John 9:5). Paul says here, We have seen the *“glory of God in the face of Christ,”* (vs. 6). And God is as we see him in Jesus Christ. An ancient theologian said, *“Salvation is humanity beholding the glory of God.”* That is exactly what we have in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. *“God is Christlike and in him there is no un-Christlikeness at all”* -- A. M. Ramsey.

From that Paul moves to the next profound statement--that this treasure of the Gospel of the light of Jesus Christ is “in us,” which he calls here “earthen vessels” or “clay jars” (vs. 7). Clay jars are made by careful hands of a potter from a lump of cool earth--like God shaping the man from the dust--and into something useful that can serve the needs of people. Once formed, shaped, fired, and cooled, the malleable substance becomes hard and brittle. Clay jars then are fragile, easily broken, and dispensable. So are we human beings: very useful for many things but full of vulnerability, susceptible to injury, and even death. We are made by God--as such--for God’s purpose of serving others and being the vessels of God’s light and love in Christ for others. We are by God’s design useable and vulnerable but yet for God’s purpose in this very way.

This compares to the pattern of Christ’s own life. The pattern of Jesus--his son-ship, his kingdom ministry, his suffering, his prayer, his death, his resurrection--shapes and under-girds our lives as we seek to follow him. This pattern was his life; and it is meant also to be ours. Wasn’t Jesus, to use Paul’s words, *“afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down”*? By that pattern of life, he became

the Savior of the world. And by that pattern of life so also do we find our salvation--our righteousness--and bring it to others. Paul says (2 Cor 5:19, 21) "*in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, and has given the message of reconciliation to us...that we might become the righteousness of God.*"--meaning God's way of making us, others, and the whole world right again.

If we understand these verses, we are not called to be some kind of Super-Christians, who somehow have some sort of power that puts us above all of life's heartaches and difficulties or to escape them. We do not have to be some sort of "above-life's-difficulties champions" in order to faithfully be disciples, or that walls us apart from our neighbors. In fact, you really can't be and follow Jesus. Think of Christ's saving life. Was he not "*afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down*"?

So Paul instructs us to affirm--not deny--life's frailties and difficulties, and to see them in the context of Christ's own life in this world of trouble. As we do, we are able to identify with others in their pains, sorrows, injustice, and weakness. Further, if we consider our lives in this manner, we can better see the need of forgiveness, compassion, and grace. We need those for ourselves, and we then,--like Christ--can then show them to others. We learn to love the unlovely, be gracious to the ungracious, to forgive the unforgivable. We more and more realize that being a Christian cannot include sitting in judgment on others' lives, or where they may be coming from. Rather, it is a matter of finding with and for others the common cause of sharing God's love and mercy in Christ Jesus. As we identify with the crucified, suffering, risen life of Jesus, we understand our lives are less about us--our strengths, our wills, our desires--as good, important, and useful as they may be--but more of what kind of person God wants us to be and who we

are for others.

We learn from Paul, that our mortal Christian lives, lives that, as he says, “*carry the death of Jesus*”--are lives lived in service and identifying with the needs and suffering of others, and the practice of forgiveness. The posture of our lives is meant to be the same as it was of Jesus. That is what Paul means when he says we regard no one “*from a human point of view,*” (2 Cor 5:16). We now are to view others--and ourselves--through the prism of Jesus Christ. See others through him, through his eyes and heart.

Imagine a simple clay jar, beaten with a stick, kicked with a foot, dropped on a concrete patio, but still not breaking. The contents inside it provide a protective stability and strength that overrides the jar’s natural fragility. That’s what we are when filled with Christ and his love. Chips, cracks, and smudges may show visible evidence of our usage and abuse, but the jar--WE--aren’t shattered. Yes, “*afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down,*” but not “*crushed, driven to despair, forsaken, or destroyed!*” Paul sees the former as part of our experience--to be sure--so “*carrying in the body the death of Jesus.*” But at the same time, because of the light of Christ within us--the power of the resurrection life within us--there is “*the life of Jesus made visible in our bodies,*” (vs. 10)--these clay jars--US!-- such as we are!

When our posture, our attitude, our disposition to others is the same of Christ in the world--that clay jar, God’s clay jar--for the sake of the world, as Paul says, we become “*the righteousness of God.*” Such lives, make visible and real to others the “*life of Jesus.*” As we more and more identify with the suffering and self-giving of Christ, we become more “*cross-shaped,*” more Christ-shaped, more Christ-like. Being a Christian is primarily a call to service to others, not showing superiority to others. That

is what it is to die to self, and live for God and others. Therein is our purpose--as "*in the beginning.*" Therein is the will of God as his whole and holy people. Therein is our salvation. See here Christ's great strength for us is his identification with us in all our frailty, sinfulness, and weakness. In that, Christ identifies with us in our humanity. And he shows us what it is to be fully human--and loving--in showing empathy and compassion.

This connection between our lives now, with their suffering and our future completion is clear in Romans 8: "*I consider the sufferings of this present time not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us... "When we cry 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then, heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him," (vss.15b-17). Jesus put it: "*If any want to be-come my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me," (Mk 8:34). Likewise Paul, here: "*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. So death is at work in us, but life in you,*" (2 Cor 4:11-12).**

The point is this. We have to realize that, obviously if God is in charge and Jesus really does rule as we confess, then surely God must want us to live in such a way that makes a healing and loving difference in the midst of all this world's pain and suffering. And the way God wants us to live is the way of Jesus. As human beings, we naturally want to end human suffering and pain in conventional ways. We often want to make other human beings do what we want by familiar, conventional ways--be it by social pressure, the voting booth, or just an attitude of smugness. These are the ways that make

sure we are in control. We want to win the world with our strengths, our excellence, our expertise. But quite to the contrary, the power of God--the sovereignty of Divine Love --doesn't always look that way. This often looks for all the world like weakness. But did not Jesus say, "*Blessed are the meek. They shall inherit the earth,*" (Mt 5: 5). Remember the pattern: sonship, kingdom, suffering, prayer, death, and life. Part of the all too-often failure and mistake of the church is that it just wants to have its influence and power in the same way other human institutions do. But we are meant to be something quite different indeed.

The only posture for the person who is part of God's chosen people is the posture of grace and humility, pure and simple. Inclusion in the household of faith as God's people is never meant to be used as a self-righteous hammer of condemnation to some in or those out of the church. The electing grace of God is meant to correct every attempt to reduce people into categories that make us feel smug and superior to others. Rather, the elect person of God is chosen in order to enlarge the circle of grace. God's purpose in Christ is a far-flung purpose of love and reconciliation to all people. The electing grace of God sends us out to work toward that day when, as Paul says, "*all things will be united in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth,*" (Eph 1:10).

One other thing about this marvelous passage. One would expect Paul's concluding sentence to read something like, "*So death is at work in us, but life is, as well.*" That's not what he writes. Instead, there's a twist, like the earlier statement (vs.5), in which Paul tells the church in Corinth that his proclamation was not self-promotion, but Christ-promotion. It was, in fact, self-demotion, declaring himself to them for the sake of Jesus: "*we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves your*

servants for his sake,” (4:5). Thus, Paul carries about in his body “the death of Jesus” to make others alive in Jesus Christ. It is a sad thing that there is so much Christianity out there that seeks to make the proclaimed look good--proclaimer promotion! Such a situation means that the proclaimed either really doesn't believe or understand the power of the Gospel of God's love in Jesus Christ. For when we are so grasped by that power and truth, we no longer feel the need to proclaim ourselves and our agendas--our rights. We proclaim Jesus for his own sake, and for the sake of that proclamation--that ministry of Christ that shines out of us--we become impassioned and free servants to the well-being of others. One lives in the confidence and peace that is given to those who follow the One who martyred himself, who gave his life away, so others might live and receive the life of God--the life that knows grace, love, and peace beyond words even in suffering.

Paul's phrase--“*treasure in clay jars*”--is a powerful double metaphor. It speaks of the awesome trust God bestows on each of us “pots”, and at the same time recognizes our own fragility and weakness as the treasure-bearers--“bearers of God's grace and life. In 2 Corinthians 3--as we saw last time--Paul said, “*and all of us with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord...are being transformed from one degree of glory to another,*” (vs.18). Now we see “*the glory of God in the face of Christ,*” (vs. 6). Here is the responsibility then, our ministry--that we each reflect to others the glory of the God's grace in Christ Jesus.

How so? God calls us to simply be who we are and let God use our lives--in their weaknesses and sufferings--every day in the God-transforming ways. We are to live out our essential and original purpose since creation as human beings--to love, honor,

respect and show kindness to one another. That's the point of Jesus' parable about the sheep and the goats in Mt 25:31-46. It's about those who at the end of their lives, in which they simply cared and ministered to their neighbors--fed the hungry, visited the imprisoned, clothed the needy, and so forth--and without self-promotion, could honestly ask, "*When Lord, did we see you thus?*" Most people don't look at others and gauge themselves by evaluating their morality or religious expressions. But they do take notice when they are the recipients or see others like themselves the recipients of genuine kindness, grace, sympathy, and understanding. The latter is why people were drawn to Christ. Of course, it also made others reject him--he was too kind, too sympathetic, too understanding. Paul says elsewhere, "*Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor...extend hospitality to strangers,*" (Rom 12:10,13b).

In Colossians, Paul writes, "*I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the church,*" (1:24). The suffering work of Christ continues. So in Paul, so in US! If we hear that, Luther's words make sense: "*We are to be little Christs to one another, bearing each other's sins as Christ bore ours.*" St. Teresa's words too: "*Christ has no body on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes thru which Christ's compassion is to look out to the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless us.*"

In a time in which there is so much talk about "my rights" and "my importance,"--to which there is some truth--there is a greater truth--that our lives, our lives as Christian people--are not primarily about ourselves or the assertion of our rights.

Rather, it's about God's rights, Christ the King's rights, his Lordship surpassing our own, for we are but clay jars--clay jars, hence humility. But which hold a great treasure. The treasure is what's ultimately important--God's glory, not ourselves. And in its promotion, not ourselves, is our extraordinary privilege and responsibility. So *"we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us...So death is at work in us, but life in you."*

Amen.