

“Treasure in Clay Jars”

Valley Presbyterian Church – June 3, 2013

2nd Sunday after Pentecost

Rev. John Wahl

Jeremiah 18:1-6

2 Corinthians 4:1-12

As we heard in this morning’s first passage from Jeremiah, the Hebrew people would have been quite familiar with the image of being like clay in the hands of their Creator: the one who fashions and re-fashions them in order to fulfill their God-given purpose, so that the divine light might shine in and through them.

In Second Corinthians, Paul describes this divine light as treasure: something valuable and sought-after. The ministry that we have, he says, is only by the mercy of God. But we have this treasure in clay jars – in fragile and inexpensive earthenware – providing a metaphor for the vulnerability of our mortal existence. We, our bodies, could so easily and often become cracked, chipped or broken.

Two thousand years later, we spend a lot of time and effort in the pursuit of protecting, preserving, restoring and improving our bodies. It seems like we are willing to do just about anything and everything to create purpose, meaning and beauty in our flesh. We punish our bodies: sculpting and stretching them, starving and scarring them, tanning, plucking, piercing, and tattooing them. Our bodies have become a canvas as we seek to transform them into the image of what we think looks good. But what does *good* look like?

Paul reframes the question with this familiar Old Testament image of the clay jar, the earthen vessel. He invites his listeners to look past the product and toward the potter; to redefine *good* through the handiwork of the artist. Apart from the vision of the artist, the clay would be formless and functionless. However, the clay jar gains its treasure by carrying the essence of the potter in each vessel that is created.¹

Paul knows that our bodies are not self-made. The treasure that he proclaims is not in his flesh, but the image of the Creator: his body houses the handiwork of the artist. What Paul preaches is that the nature of God seen and made known in the way he lives. He cannot correct or contort his body to be more beautiful; there is no power in being self-made. Instead, the power comes from the potter, the one who became human and gave his life for the life of others.

¹ Jake Edwards from “Living By the Word”

Why link this treasure with such inexpensive and easily broken vessels? So that it will be clear that the treasure's power comes from God and not from us.²

Paul goes on to point out that being a bearer of the gospel in this world is a difficult prospect. He admits to being perplexed, hard pressed, persecuted and often struck down. The world is not nearly as eager to accept the divine light as we might assume. For some reason, bizarre as it may seem, many people prefer the darkness and therefore push back against those who offer illumination. Thus, God's shining through us occurs precisely as we – in the same way as the Christ we follow – rely on God's promises of justice and mercy, despite the reactions that we might confront.

Today, we recognize the many people who give countless hours to this church; sharing of their gifts and their treasure – even if the light is revealed only through the chips and cracks of our fragile bodies. We might imagine that if only we could get it together – bettering our outer strength and beauty – it would make us more attractive or effective. But, it is only when the light of God can shine through us that the power of God can truly be revealed. At times, we might not understand, we might encounter resistance, we might even become the target of someone else's ire; and yet, it is our call and purpose to let the divine light shine.

And so, in the context of the life of this church, you – God's people – give of yourselves as teachers, musicians and wedding hostesses; you set up tables, change banners, ring bells, bake cookies and all other kinds of public and behind-the-scenes actions. And through these, God's light is able to penetrate. Your time, energy and resources could have been used making your outer bodies shine, but you chose instead to put the spotlight not on yourselves, but on the church, the body of Christ, giving glory to God, the artist who forms and re-forms us.

Last Sunday, while I was in Iowa, I attended mass at St. Raphael's, which is a beautiful, neo-Gothic Cathedral in downtown Dubuque. It was Sunday evening of Memorial Day weekend, and present were five young men who had just been admitted to the Deaconate, the final step in their training before being ordained as priests. All five will be interning at the Cathedral this summer; and all were given a chance to briefly speak. The final one, instead of offering his own remarks, chose to read aloud what is popularly known as the Prayer of St. Francis:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me bring love.
Where there is offense, let me bring pardon.
Where there is discord, let me bring union.
Where there is error, let me bring truth.

² Lois Malcolm, "Treasure in Clay Jars"

Where there is doubt, let me bring faith.
Where there is despair, let me bring hope.
Where there is darkness, let me bring your light.
Where there is sadness, let me bring joy.
O Master, let me not seek as much
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love,
for it is in giving that one receives,
it is in self-forgetting that one finds,
it is in pardoning that one is pardoned,
it is in dying that one is raised to eternal life.³

Friends, as we come to the Lord's Table today, let us remember that as earthen vessels – clay jars fashioned by and in the image of the potter – we can be fed and filled here. The chips and cracks in our bodies are not flaws that keep us from fulfilling our God-given purpose, but instead windows by which the divine light can shine forth into the world. Through this meal, allow the potter to refashion you so that you might more fully live into the particular ministry to which you have been called. That might be the care for your family, or the reaching out to a neighbor, or the commitment to a cause, or the service to your church. But, whatever the specific calling, the treasure of divine light resides inside; therefore, let it shine.

Lord, make us your instruments. While we may be surrounded by either perceptions or realities of scarce time, negative news, and substantial obstacles, we are vessels created and re-created by God's gracious hand. That our clay jars may become broken need not cause us to fear; for Christ, our Lord, has already faced and conquered all things – even death. This is why Paul can say that we are being given up to death for Jesus' sake: what I think he means is that, as Christ's followers, our individual selves are giving way to the collective good; that Christ is at work in us not for us, but for all; just as the light within us is not for us, but to shine upon all.

We have this treasure in clay jars. May the beauty and the power of the potter be lived out through artist's handiwork. AMEN.

³ First published in *La Clochette*, 1912.