

2 Corinthians 4: 5-9 “Treasure in Clay Jars” Rev. Janet Chapman 3/16/25

When my oldest daughter Mikayla took a college semester in London, I visited Great Britain for the first time. It was a wonderful adventure. I remember walking near Buckingham Palace and coming across a church that, we were told, was well over 300 years old. Seeing ancient history up close and personal is something we rarely get to do in our relatively young nation. This particular church was under renovation and was, in fact, just a shell of its original self – nothing standing but the four walls, no windows, doors, or pews. Scaffolding was up all around it -much like what we saw going on in the rebuilding of Notre Dame after that devastating fire a few years back. Around the church was a chain link fence with barbed wire across the top. Near the opening that served as a door was a large sign and these words were written for all to see: “Danger! Enter at your own risk.” The words were designed to protect the general public from construction accidents, yet such words could have easily been erected around the church of Corinth in Paul’s day, not to mention some 21st century churches if we are being honest. “Danger! Enter at your own risk” has been proven true as many church people, both clergy and laity, have been chewed up by the institutional church and tossed aside, broken and in despair.

Paul writes to his troubled church in Corinth because they have confused major matters and minor items, majoring in the minor stuff while neglecting the major stuff. They were preoccupied with class distinctions, differences between Jewish and Gentile folk, arguments about circumcision, right and wrong food, insiders and outsiders, and even some lawsuits, all the usual stuff that makes for church quarrels. Paul wants to call them out, but he knows that isn’t done well through an impersonal letter. In an effort to make his words more approachable, he searches for imagery that will be familiar to the people of Corinth. He picks texts from Jeremiah and Isaiah that speak of the clay and the potter, how the potter molds the clay and the clay surrenders to the potter’s hand, and he jiggles the images a bit to make them work. The problem in Corinth wasn’t disobedience to God as with Jeremiah’s folk, nor was it threats of resistance as with Isaiah’s people in exile; the problem was majoring in the minor stuff

while neglecting the major stuff. So Paul adjusts the texts, as Walter Brueggeman notes, from the clay and the potter to about clay pots and the contents of the clay pot. Neither Jeremiah nor Isaiah had thought to comment on the contents of the clay pot. Using holy imagination, Paul extends the imagery to say, “We have this treasure in clay jars.” We have this container and the stuff contained, and we have confused them. We think the clay pot is the real thing and have neglected the stuff inside. We recognize ourselves as the clay pots that have been fashioned by the potter, and then come to believe that we are also the treasure inside. But the treasure is actually the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. The treasure is that light which, by God’s grace, is given to us who are cracked and broken in so many ways so that we might endure. But sometimes we, in moments of great insight, come to think the extraordinary power of that treasure belongs to us. We broken pots get mixed up regarding what is most important, thinking that the people of the church, the clay pot that holds the treasure of the good news, is some big deal for us to control and manipulate. We get sidetracked with all the little stuff that preoccupies us rather than the more crucial stuff found inside the clay pot.

There is a scene early on in Margaret Mitchell’s classic novel, *Gone with the Wind*, of a barbecue at Twelve Oaks plantation. Many young people were there, dressed up, flirting, bragging, and genuinely having a good time. Then word comes that the “War Between the States” had started. The young men donned their uniforms, mounted their horses, and rode off to fight for the Confederacy. They fully believed the war would soon be over, and they would come home victorious and heroes. Four years later, they came home wounded, hungry, disillusioned, and defeated. They came home to a South that had been burned and looted; all was gone. I thought of this story at my first Pastor’s Gathering sponsored by our Pension Fund in San Diego almost 20 years ago. There I ran into many of my seminary friends, folks that I had studied with some 15 years earlier. We had all entered church ministry with high energy and strong idealism; we believed that once we got into the churches and taught what we had learned, all would be right in God’s realm. We believed there was nothing in the

church that would not be better once we made our mark. At that first gathering, I heard story after story of my comrades, now older and wiser, about their brokenness; of churches that wouldn't do the right thing about the race or LGBTQ issues; of elders who were masters of political manipulation; of families who were selfish in their demands; of old folks who excelled in controlling the church and pastor with gossip and innuendo. We shared stories of our families being harassed by these same people and of the unfair demands placed upon our families and ourselves. The recurrent refrain was "the church is the only army that shoots its wounded." Many questioned, "is the church really worth it?" There's no sense in keeping secrets, pretending that things are always cool when they are not, acting as if we have it all together 24/7 and that we've got this when we really don't. To this day, the majority of us who are even still in professional church ministry, which is only about 50%, occasionally ask ourselves if we shouldn't just go back to doing whatever we were doing before we said, "Here I am, Lord, send me." But Paul says, "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body."

This letter to Corinth was, no doubt, a difficult one for Paul to write as he found himself in that difficult position of having to defend himself. He dearly loved the people and was committed to serving them, but his calling was being challenged. Anyone in leadership at one time or another knows that feeling. We begin to question ourselves; our lack of confidence and low self-esteem become major issues rather than, in this case, the gospel itself. We aren't perfect but are expected to present ourselves as such, to be all things to all people, to make everybody happy. But Paul tells the church, both you and I, that it is not our job to make folks happy, we are called to make them holy. In life as in the church, we can't possibly live up to everyone's expectations. Instead, we have been called to serve, not because we have it all together or always know what to say or how to say it, but because God chose us and

equips us. God loves you and I enough to forgive us when we make mistakes and will use us to build up the body of Christ. In us, therefore, the light of Christ becomes visible in the darkness of our world. One songwriter put it this way: “Something beautiful, something good. All my confusion, (God) understood. All I had to offer (God) was brokenness and strife. And (God) made something beautiful of my life.”

Paul chose not to focus on the perishable container, the clay pot that so easily cracks and breaks, but on the precious contents, the treasure within. We have this treasure, this message of salvation through Christ, in “cracked pots,” all of us. But we are just the vessels in which God has placed indeterminable wealth. God’s power is inside of us. Cynthia Hale calls it a paradox; the gospel is filled with paradoxes, isn’t it? The first shall be last and the last first. Whoever will be great must be servant of all. If we want to save our lives, we must be willing to lose them. Treasure in cracked pots.

A story is told of a dentist who kept old teeth he had removed from his patients for years, filled or capped with gold. The teeth looked ugly, grey and decayed, bad and rotten to the bone, but still the dentist believed they might be worth something someday. The dentist paid his patients or pulled them for free and kept them in a secret safe deposit box. After he died, the family discovered his secret. The teeth were brought to a company that would buy them, break the gold away from the tooth, refine it with high heat and test it to determine its value. The family was blown away when the company paid them over \$10,000 for those old, rotten teeth.

Paul reminds us all that such an image as treasure found in jars of clay teaches us to focus on God and not ourselves or others. God dares to place great treasure in fragile vessels that we may be transformed into the likeness of Christ, so that one day, people will no longer see us but Christ instead. It is God who uses our trials, our disappointments, our trying experiences, to trim off the rough edges, to break away the rotten portions, to buff out and polish us smooth. So that tried in the fire, we will come out gold. The gospel, and the church that proclaims it, is worth the effort, so come inside, let it get inside of you, as Christ becomes visible in us all.