

Lessons From the Potter: Lightbearers©

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

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Last week, I made sure I didn't make the same mistake I had made the week before, which was to not come and check on this little cylinder that was a work in progress. It became a good illustration for how we can be – dried up and rough around the edges, kind of worthless really – if we stay away from our Creator, Potter God.

So, this week, on Tuesday, I came up and worked on this creation that was started last Sunday. I prayerfully and carefully was able to lift the clay up on the sides and then I trimmed it around the bottom. This time, I purposely left it to dry so it can be trimmed and ready to be baked in a kiln, then glazed and baked again for the final time.

It's not perfect, by any means, but I was pleased to see a bowl forming, which was actually what I intended it to be! And I think it is a good visual for today's scripture from 2 Corinthians.

The Apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth about being like clay jars. He says it is a good thing to be clay, to be imperfect mortals because it keeps us humble.

We are like clay pots – we are flawed, we might chip easily, we may be weak and cracked. But all that is good because we want God's glory to shine through us. We want the focus to be on the Potter, not the pot. Our flaws and chips actually allow the light of Christ to shine through us.

In a day when we are bombarded with plenty of strong ego's in the news – you know – politicians who speak loudly about all their strengths and all their ability; who promises the moon if they are voted in; who will change everything that is bad and create a perfect world – in times like this it is stunning to hear the humbleness of Paul.

Peterson's version of this text – The Message – says it this way: "If you only look at us, you might well miss the brightness. We carry this precious Message around in the unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives. That's to prevent anyone from confusing God's incomparable power with us. As it is," Paul says, "there's not much chance of that. You know for yourselves that we're not much to look at."

What the New Revised Standard Version calls "treasure in clay jars," the Message calls "this precious Message in unadorned clay pots."

So what exactly is the precious Message – this treasure we carry?

Paul begins this passage by talking about light. He mentions the creation story – it is the God who said “Let light shine out of darkness” that has filled us up with light and with an understanding of knowing God’s glory in the face of Jesus.

We then remember what we heard not very long ago as we celebrated the birth of Christ. John writes in his first chapter, verses 3 and 4: “What has come into being in him (Jesus) was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

And of course, Paul is writing all this after Jesus had been crucified and buried and had risen from the dead. He tells this Good News story about how God came in the flesh – became a clay pot along with us.

He tells us that “the Word (meaning Jesus) became flesh and dwelt among us.” In the Greek the word for dwelt literally means “pitched his tent.” God came and pitched his tent among mortals. He became a mortal and lived with us.

So, if in other places in the Bible we mortals are referred to as clay, why couldn’t we say, “God threw his clay on the potter’s wheel and became a clay pot along with us?”

What I think this “precious treasure message” Paul refers to is Grace. Think about it. Like this pot and really – all pots ... ceramic jars, bowls, pitchers, vases ... every last one of those human creations are flawed. Imperfect in some way. Weak enough that they can shatter into a thousand pieces of shards.

Yet, Paul tells us we are like those clay pots; we too are flawed; imperfect; weak and vulnerable and easily broken. But in our brokenness and our imperfect lives, God chooses to use us as His vessels! God allows us – as flawed as we are – to be God’s light-bearers. We, from the time we are baptized, carry the Light of Christ within us for others to see.

I so often feel just how unworthy I am to be a light-bearer for Christ. I am imperfect. I find myself asking for forgiveness most every night for something I did that is not how I think my Creator wants me to act or do.

I know that I have all those ugly, human traits in me – I can be jealous, impatient, greedy, selfish, hateful, sarcastic. As much as I try to leave those traits behind me, I find that they keep popping up.

Paul writes in these words in the 7th chapter of his letter to the Romans where he discusses this inner conflict – these struggle humans have between God’s laws and our sinfulness. I’m reading from the New Living Translation:

“²¹ I have discovered this principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. ²² I love God’s law with all my heart. ²³ But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. ²⁴ Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? ²⁵ Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.”

And then, beginning in chapter 8, we hear these beautiful words of assurance, of mercy, of sheer grace:

8 So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. ² And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death. ³ The Law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin’s control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins.”

That, my friends, is what we carry in these clay jars we call our bodies. Grace! It is the grace that God pours into our hearts as we come to the waters of baptism.

It is grace that is the Good News! We are forgiven, though we are weak and imperfect. It is the grace of God’s amazing love for us, sent to us in Jesus – the Light of the world.

It is grace that allows us to carry that amazing, glorious light and love for others to see. Right through our chips and cracks; right through our flaws and imperfections we carry this precious treasure of grace so others might come to see and understand as well.

I read a story written by Rev. Joanna Adams who tells about an aunt that she dearly loved, who was a Christian educator in the church they attended. This is her story, in her words, as she tells about spending the time with her aunt at the church:

I loved to spend summer days hanging around with her and wandering the halls of the church on exploring expeditions. One Friday, I happened upon a little kitchen near the sanctuary where the elements for communion the following Sunday were already set up. I clearly remember thinking that it wouldn't hurt a thing if I ate just one little cube of bread from one of the trays, which I did.

I was not satisfied with one piece of bread and wanted another, so I took another one and then another, and pretty soon, I had finished off most of the contents of the trays.

That little feast, of course, made me thirsty, and so I drank a cup of grape juice and then another and so on and so forth until I heard the turn of the doorknob and beheld my aunt standing in the doorway.

I looked at her, she looked at me. In that moment I realized that I lived in a world of "infinite possibilities." "I shouldn't have eaten all of this," I said.

"I know," she said. "Let's fix it all back the way it was." We did, and all the time we worked in silence, it was if there was some sort of clay jar over my head pouring out grace. Washing me clean. Helping me become a better human being.

Grace is like that. Grace is not just forgiving but it is also a love that does not condemn in the first place, even if we deserve the condemnation.

This morning, we have the privilege of witnessing grace being poured into the heart of Celia Christine Pettit. My favorite description of baptism says, "Baptism is an outward, visible sign of an inward, invisible grace."

We can see the water. We can hear it splash. We can feel the wetness of it. It is an outward visible sign.

We cannot see what God is doing inside this child, but we have promises that there is something going on that is done, not by me or Pastor Shaun or Celia's parents. It is only God who does this inward, invisible thing called grace that is for Celia all the days of her life.

She too is a clay pot – one that hasn't had much time to become cracked yet – but along with the grace God is filling her with comes the light of the glory of God; the light of Jesus Christ.

She too, just like us, becomes a Light-bearer. Thanks be to God!

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