

Treasure in Clay Jars

A sermon preached at Second Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time, June 1, 1997.
Scripture Lessons: 1 Samuel 3:1-20; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; 2 Corinthians 4:5-12; Mark 2:23-3:6.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

"God has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But 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." 2 Corinthians 4:6b-7.

God has given us a treasure. He's given us the light of knowledge enabling us to see God's glory in the face of Jesus. If we want to know what God is like, we look at Jesus. We won't see everything there is to know about God by looking at Jesus. God is too vast and mysterious for that. But we'll see what we most need to know. We'll see that God is love. We'll see that God shares in the sufferings of the world. We'll see that God redeems that suffering and transforms it, just as Jesus transformed the suffering of the cross by his resurrection. We know God in Jesus Christ. God has given us light to see his glory in the face of Jesus. ^{WHAT A TREASURE THAT KNOWLEDGE} ~~God has given us the treasure of the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. He's give us the treasure to share with others.~~

"But", Paul says, "we have this treasure in clay jars." He's talking about himself primarily and the other apostles, but he's also talking about us. We're all "clay jars". The Bible often talks about human beings metaphorically as clay jars. God is the potter, we are the clay. God shapes us and molds us into useful clay jars.

Clay jars are fragile. They're easily chipped. They're easily scratched. They're easily broken. If you cram too much

into a thin clay jar it will break. If you put a bunch of clay jars close together they'll get damaged - a cracked lip, a broken handle, a shattered vase. Clay jars aren't that strong. They're not like a cast iron pot. They're not like a stainless steel pan. God didn't put his treasure - the treasure of the Gospel - into a crush-proof box. He didn't wrap his treasure in styrofoam padding. He entrusted the treasure of the Gospel to fragile clay jars like us.

Sometimes people don't join the church because they say their faith is weak. ~~Or they say they're not strong enough to live a Christian life.~~ Sometimes people don't accept a nomination to be an elder or deacon because they don't feel strong enough spiritually. But one of the built in conditions of true Christianity is a confession of being weak and flawed. We are so fragile. We are clay jars and we'll remain clay jars throughout our lives. Faith in Jesus Christ doesn't suddenly transform us into iron skilletts or stainless steel pans that can be dropped and knocked about without being broken.

We like to think that if we really have God's treasure in us, ^{if} we are really Christians ^{as known by} we'd be able to fly like Superman or fight like Mr. T or Xena the princess warrior. ^{or He-Man.} We'd swoop in to rescue our children and friends. But God doesn't often choose people like Mr. T or Superman or Xena. He chooses people more like Erkel or Inspector Clouseau. He chooses weak and fragile people who bleed and hurt, and who can sometimes barely cope with what's going on around them.

Why does God entrust the priceless treasure of the Gospel to fragile and sinful human beings? The answer is simple. He wants to make it perfectly clear that, when he uses us, it's his power and not our wisdom, or character, or technique that does the job.

Most of us are acutely aware of our weakness. ^{We know} So often our faith is weak. ^{we know our} Our wills are weak. We want to be a Christian in our hearts, but we feel like the devil sometimes. ~~And~~ Most of us are aware of our failures. Oh boy, are we ever aware of our failures - failures at our work, failures in our marriage, failures in our parenting skills, failures in our moral direction. And if we ever forget our failures there will be people eager to tell us "in Christian love" what ~~are~~ ^{our} failures are. If everyone knew us the way we know ourselves, we might just wonder at God's sanity in placing the treasure of the Gospel into clay jars like ourselves.

There's one more thing about clay jars. Clay jars are not only fragile, they're functional. Most clay jars are made to be of some use. Clay jars are used to carry water to thirsty people. Clay jars are used to carry food to feed hungry people. ^{Small clay lanterns give light} Clay jars are used for all sorts of things. Clay jars are made for a purpose. And clay jars need to be empty, need to be fillable in order to be functional. We can't be functional, unless we're fillable.

Too many church members are merely ornamental. They're on the membership rolls, but they're not functional. God's Spirit must fill us so that our lights will shine. God must get inside us. Christ must get inside us. When Christ is in us, we become

functional. When Christ is in us, we find ways to share the gospel with our friends. We create new ministries to serve men and women. We teach. We visit. We listen. We give testimonies. We help clean up messes. We pray. We clay pots must have an opening for God to pour his Spirit into us in order for us to be useful. Too many Christians are merely ornamental. We're not functional. If we're not fillable, we won't be functional.

I want God to use me. I want God to use you. Don't say, "I'm worthless. God can't use me. I'm only a clay jar." Say rather - pray rather,

Spirit of the living God,
Fall afresh on me;
Spirit of the living God,
Fall afresh on me.
Melt me, mold me,
Fill me, use me.
Spirit of the living god,
Fall afresh on me.

If we have that treasure, if we have Christ in us, if we see the glory of God in the face of Jesus, then we'll never be crushed no matter what the affliction. Although perplexed, we'll never be driven to blank despair. Though persecuted, we'll never be forsaken. Though struck down, we'll never be destroyed. And in both our sufferings and joys the life of Jesus will be seen in us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Let us pray: Mighty God, who divided light from darkness, and made the sun to shine: wake us from the night of doubt and fear, and let us live this day, and every day, in the light of the truth taught by your Spirit, and revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord, whom we praise forever. Amen.