

Treasures in Earthen Vessels

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the second Sunday after Pentecost, June 5, 1988. Scripture Lesson: 2 Corinthians 4:5-12.

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

I want to address what I say primarily to those of you who will be professing your faith in Jesus Christ in a few moments.

1. God has given you a priceless treasure. He's given you the light of knowledge enabling you to see God's glory in the face of Jesus. Christianity has always said, if you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. You won't see *everything* there is to know about God by looking at Jesus. God is too vast and mysterious for that. But you'll see what you *most* need to know. You'll see that God is love, that somehow God shares in the sufferings of the world and that in the end he redeems that suffering and transforms it, just as Jesus transformed the suffering which ended his earthly life. The mysterious, transcendent God is known in Jesus Christ. God has given you light to see his glory in the face of Jesus. That's why you're professing your faith in Christ this morning. That's why you're joining the Church. God has given you the treasure of the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ.

2. Paul goes on to say that God has placed this treasure... the revelation of who God is... in earthen vessels. He's talking about himself primarily and the other apostles, but he's also talking about us. *We* are all "earthen vessels". The Bible often talks about human beings metaphorically, as earthen vessels. God is the potter, we are the clay. God shapes us and molds us into useful earthen vessels. Now I want you to think about what it means to be an earthen vessel.

Earthen vessels are fragile. They're easily chipped, scratched and broken. If you cram too much into a shallow or thin earthen vessel it

breaks. If you put a bunch of earthen vessels close together they'll get damaged- a cracked lip, a broken handle, a shattered vase. Earthen vessels aren't that strong, not like a cast iron pot or a stainless steel pan. God didn't put his treasure in a crush-proof box. He didn't wrap his treasure in styrofoam padding. He entrusted his treasure, the light of the gospel, to fragile earthen vessels like ourselves.

Sometimes people tell me that they're held back from church membership, or from accepting the office of elder or deacon, or even from participation in the services of the church, because their faith is so weak. They have a hard time believing. Or they don't feel that they can live up to the little faith they have. They don't want to be hypocrites who profess one thing and do another. And I always tell them that one of the built in conditions of true Christianity is a confession of weakness, a confession of not being able to do what God wants. *We are earthen vessels*, and we'll remain earthen vessels throughout our lives. Faith in Jesus doesn't suddenly transform us into iron pots or stainless steel frying pans.

We like to think that if we really had God's treasure in us, we'd be able to fly like Superman, swoop in from anywhere to rescue our children, rescue our friends, and win the heart of any Lois Lane. But God doesn't choose Supermen and Superwomen. He chooses people more like Inspector Clouseau, the fumbling detective. He chooses weak and fragile people who bleed and hurt, and who can sometimes barely cope. So remember as you make your profession of faith that you're not going to be a Superman or Superwoman, you're just an earthen vessel but (and this is the important thing) you hold God's treasure.

Why does God do it this way? Why doesn't he turn us into bionic women or six million dollar men overnight when he converts us? Why does he

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

Most of us are acutely aware of *our weakness*. So often our faith is weak. Our wills are weak. We want to be a Christian in our hearts, but we feel like the devil sometimes. We believe that God is good, but we can't understand why he seems to put up with so much evil, pain and suffering in the world. And most of us are aware of *our failures*. We try something and we fail. I dare say that all of us have a few haunting memories of failure that keep rattling in the closet of our minds. Failures at our job, failures as a parent, moral failures. If everyone knew us the way we know ourselves, we might just wonder at God's sanity in placing such a priceless treasure into fragile and weak earthen vessels like ourselves.

But there's one more thing about earthen vessels that I want you to think about. Earthen vessels are not only fragile, they're also functional. Most clay jars are made to be of some use. You go to a museum and you may see ancient clay pots made thousands of years ago, but the potter who made them wasn't making a vase to be a collector's item. He was making a jar for a slave to carry water, or maybe a jug for wine to be served at a wedding, or maybe a clay lamp which was made to be filled with oil and then lit to chase away the darkness. Earthen vessels were made for a purpose, to carry and pour whatever someone puts in it. So earthen vessels had to be fillable in order to be functional.

And somehow you must be fillable if you're going to be functional Christians. Too many church members are merely ornamental earthen vessels. They've confessed their faith. They're on the rolls but they're not

functional. If you new members are going to be functional somehow God's Spirit must fill you so that your lights will shine. Somehow God must get inside you. Christ must get inside you. When Christ is in you, you become the functional vessels that share the treasure of his grace with other people. Kierkegaard uses in one of his sermons this symbol of an earthen vessel waiting to be filled. He says that often we've turned the earthen vessel upside down so that when God pours out his Spirit, the Spirit doesn't get inside us. God doesn't force us. He invites us to open our lives to him, letting him gently and respectfully flow into our inner selves. If we refuse to let him work his way inside of us, if we're not fillable, we won't be functional.

Will you let God use you? I hope and pray that you will. Will you share that treasure with others, sharing the light that God has given you, letting that light shine in you so that others will see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ?

One final word (and this is a promise). If you have that treasure, if you have Christ in you, if you truly believe the gospel and see in the face of Jesus the glory of God, then you'll never be crushed no matter what the affliction; though perplexed, you'll never be driven to despair; though persecuted, you'll never be forsaken; though struck down, you'll never be destroyed. And in both your sufferings and in your joys and triumphs the life of Jesus will be seen in you. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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.