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2 Corinthians 4:5-12 – Entrusted with Treasure

This month we continue each week in worship hearing from Second Corinthians. Paul founded the church in Corinth and it was not an easy start. The church was planted and grew there in the soil of a cosmopolitan and diverse area. As one commentator writes “That church was not a group of impeccable saints but one of sinners in the process of being saved and of thinking through the meaning of their faith.” (Ernest Best, *Second Corinthians Interpretation, a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching*, 1987 John Knox Press, p. 5)

Paul wrote this letter to reconnect with the church, to encourage their ministry, to invite their participation in the ongoing spread of the gospel, and to respond to some challenges they faced. Today we hear from chapter four, verses five through twelve. Listen now for God’s word to us.

**5** For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake.

**6** For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

**7** 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.

**8** We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair;

**9** persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;

**10** always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

**11** For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.

**12** So death is at work in us, but life in you.

The Word of the Lord (thanks be to God)

What do you treasure?

In times of natural disaster, people grab their treasure first. Their spouse, their children, their dog, their kitten. Maybe some irreplaceable items – valuable or sentimental, personal or useful.

We see the video footage of people on the move. Refugees on boats, clinging to one another, a child tightly clutching a stuffed animal, a woman holding a pouch of jewelry that she can sell for food in the coming days.

Cars on the interstate loaded with stuff – suitcases and pillows and the dog crate and the one piece of handmade furniture that came from the grandparents' house. Or we see the treasure afterwards – caught in trees, debris on the side of the road, thrown across a field by the wind.

Many years ago I read a story about a missing Stradivarius violin. A priceless musical instrument. Owned by UCLA, it had been placed in the

charge of a faculty member who was also the second violinist in the University string quartet. The second violinist reported the priceless violin missing. Authorities were suspicious that he had stolen it and either had hidden it for himself or had sold it somehow for monetary gain. However, he said that he thought on the way home from a concert, he had stopped to buy groceries and when loading the groceries, he put the violin on the top of the car. Then he got in the car and drove off, simply forgetting the violin was up there.

Decades later, the violinist's story was confirmed when the instrument showed up at a music shop to be tuned. The present owner said he bought the violin from someone who found it lying because an on-ramp to a southern California freeway.

You'd think if you were entrusted with a Stradivarius you would guard it day and night, never let it out of your sight, and certainly never stick it on top of your Volkswagen in the Harris Teeter parking lot and drive away.

I wonder how that happens – maybe you are busy, a lot on your mind, you carry the Stradivarius every day and it no longer seems quite so precious anymore, and you've got to eat and it's so easy to put the Stradivarius out

of the way long enough to load up the milk and the bananas and the Special K. Oops.

What do you treasure? Where do you keep your treasure? How do you treat your treasure?

In the beginning, in creation, God made the earth and the heavens. God took the dirt, the soil, the dust of the ground, and formed a creature. I imagine God the artist, God the potter, shaping the dirt, arms, legs, little fingers and toes, a face with a nose and eyes, ears on the side. God formed the creature and breathed in the breath of life so that the creature became a living being. The English translates the creature as “man” but the Hebrew word is Adam (where we get the name Adam) formed from the adamah which means “earth.” I think a better translation might be mud creature, a living being made from the dirt. Into this mud creature God breathed life. And with life came all sorts of gifts. The breath of life brought possibilities – choices of what to do and how to be in the world. The range of human emotion – sadness and anger and happiness and contentment. The ability to communicate – using the breath of life to move across vocal cords and through the mouth to create sounds that become words and that

share who we are, what we want to do, and how we are feeling. God put the treasure of life into the mud creature and humanity was born.

When Paul wrote the Christians in the city of Corinth, he reminded them.

You are earthen vessels, you are clay jars, you are made from the very dirt upon which you walk every day. You are not made from starlight or from angel wings or from rainbow colors. You are made from the earth. All the shades of the dirt – from the sands of the desert to the rich fertile soil of the field. You are earthen vessels.

And into each vessel God has put treasure. For Paul that treasure is the light of God that shines out of the darkness. The light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. The light that shines with love no matter what the response, love that shines from a cross forgiving even there, love that shines from an empty tomb on Easter morning offering the hope of new life.

The treasure of that light has been put into earthen vessels, into clay jars. Why? So that it's clear that the light comes from God alone. The light isn't something we can create. It isn't something we can control. It isn't ours.

The light shines through us and in us but never belongs to us. The treasure has been placed in our lives by God, like the breath in the nostrils of Adam.

I've seen a t-shirt that offers two truths – number one, there is a God; number two, you are not him.

You are a clay pot, an earthen vessel, Adam – and God has entrusted you with treasure. We are clay pots entrusted with a priceless treasure, the light of God in Jesus Christ.

What would it mean for us to look at our neighbors and see the clay of their pots but also see the treasure inside them? The clay brings a dose of reality to us – we know we will never be perfect, we know that the people we love will never be perfect, they will never live up to the ideals we have in our minds. But the treasure offers tremendous good news – the potential of God at work in any life. God gave them breath. God gave them life. God put treasure in there, entrusting it into a clay jar. No clay pot is too ugly or broken or cracked to be entrusted with the treasure of Jesus Christ, the light of God.

The stole I'm wearing today is a visual reminder of this truth. It's annoying. The edges are frayed and messy. Every time I wear it, one of you kindly offers to take it home and fix it. But this is the point – frayed and imperfect.

When I was in seminary, Princeton had an artist in residence who worked in a studio adjacent to the campus, offered instruction for students and shared his art with the seminary community. His name was Sasha Mahovkin and he was a potter. One evening Sasha led a worship service in the chapel – as you entered the sanctuary you saw that his potter's wheel was placed on an elevated platform over several of the front pews. The opening of the service was fairly traditional – we sang a hymn, we prayed. But when it came time for the sermon, Sash climbed up onto that platform, sat down, and turned on the potter's wheel. He threw a slab of clay on the wheel and as he began to shape that clay, he talked. His words and his work became a sermon.

I remember the way he finished that sermon. He had crafted a beautiful pot by the end of the evening and then he took a flower. He held the flower up so we could all see it and then he tossed it into the pot. Then he placed his hands around the pot once more and as it spun there on the wheel he raised its edges and closed it off completely at the top. When he took the vessel off of the wheel, he told us that we would be the only people who knew what was inside that earthen vessel, we would be the only ones who knew there was a treasure inside that clay pot.

God placed treasure in us, entrusting us with the gift of good news, with a light that can shine whenever we love in the midst of darkness.

When Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, he wrote to them as a church, as a community. His letter was carried by messengers and delivered to the church and read when they gathered together for worship and fellowship.

Probably Paul knew plenty of people in that church, knew their names and knew their stories. But he wrote to them as a community, called and claimed by God, gathered together to walk the journey of faith together.

I wonder if Paul intended for them to think about the clay jars and the treasure as a community. Paul might have offered this image to them as they thought about being church together, together they are a clay jar and together they have been given a treasure.

Paul knew their church community was earthen, human, not made from starlight or angel wings or rainbow colors. The church was broken and imperfect, cracked and marred by imperfection. But the church was where God had placed the treasure of the light, the treasure of good news, the treasure of Christ.



What would it mean for us to think about the church as shaped by God to be the vessel that will carry God's treasure?

The church is an earthen vessel. The church is a community of broken people, who have messed up and have been hurt and have been cracked. Or as Paul wrote – afflicted in every way but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed. That's church. Sinners in the process of being saved.

If you are looking for the perfect community of faith, keep on going. I don't think you will find it. If you want the church to always care for you perfectly, you will be disappointed. If you want the pastor to always agree with your point of view, you will be frustrated. If you want a church with no hypocrites, no one who is selfish, no one whose life doesn't match their faith, then this won't be it. If you want the people around you to always remember your name and ask about your grandmother who had surgery last week, you will be sad. If you want a worship service where you know all of the hymns and there are no wrong notes, where no baby cries, no teenager sighs and no adult dozes off, you need to keep looking.

We are an earthen vessel here.

If you are longing for a place to be real, to share the journey, to know you aren't alone in the struggle, then I pray the church is a community where you experience welcome.

If you are skeptical of organized religion, welcome. Despite my best efforts, we remain fairly disorganized.

If you just want to sit in the back and pray nobody speaks to you because you just can't handle it today, then welcome.

If you are ready to look in the mirror and acknowledge your brokenness, and accept your earthen cracks, then join us in praying in worship every Sunday morning, welcome.

If you sometimes put the treasure on the top of the car and drive off, and you know that God has entrusted you with more than you deserve, then welcome.

If you long to see the light of Christ shining in the darkness, if you want the hope that this isn't all there is, if you want to see God at work despite the earthenness of humanity, then welcome. God has entrusted you with treasure. God has entrusted us, the church, with treasure. We are an earthen vessel but the light still shines through. We see the light in the love here – in the face of a child at baptism, in the bread broken and the cup

poured, in ministries of care and service. Thanks be to God for the light that shines through the cracks of our brokenness. Amen.