

Jars of Clay
2 Corinthians 4: 7-15

**First Presbyterian Church
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In what kind of container would you place treasure? If you had some French perfume that was \$500 an ounce, would you put it in a Walmart plastic spray bottle? Of course not. If you had a Van Gogh painting, would you put it in an unpainted, plywood frame? Not a chance. So if you had a beam of light from God's eternal glory, why would you put it in a brittle ceramic jar? In our passage this morning, that's exactly what God does. There is a treasure given to human beings: the ability to see who Jesus is and to love him for it. That knowledge lights up our souls into eternity. But we who have such knowledge live in these aging, decaying, limited, frail mortal bodies. "We have this treasure in jars of clay" says Paul.

Last week, Sally Hobbs passed away. You would know her as the mother of long-time member Annie Kelly. Well, Ms. Hobbs was a lively spirit even in her 87th year. She didn't let physical infirmity get her down. So her obituary contained some fun in it. It reads, "A born fighter, you might say she was preceded in death by most of her vital organs and key body parts." I get that. That's so playful and buoyant. I could add to it for my obituary. "He was preceded in death by a full head of hair, smooth skin and his right mind!" We are but jars of clay. And yet we may contain in our inglorious containers a treasure of eternal value. What's the reason for putting Christ's own Spirit inside our feeble bodies? Paul explains, "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us."

Receiving the Spirit of Christ Jesus opens our eyes to seeing him as our Savior and Lord. We get mystically joined to Jesus, and his eternal life becomes ours. But he does not make us Superman or Wonder Woman. We're still us. We live in a constantly reliant relationship on Christ our life. He is the source of power, endurance, even life itself, not us. Apart from Christ, I am a withering branch. In Christ, I can be a fruitful vine. That living reliance is what God made us for. In it is all our joy and our deepest empowerment as persons.

We learn this best in extreme circumstances. And few people endured more extreme suffering than Paul. Arrested. Beaten. Whipped. Shipwrecked. Hunted. Scorned. Suffering a bodily affliction that would not heal. Always engaged in

conflict. Enraging people even as he offered them the word of life. It was a tough gig. But Paul wore his suffering for Christ proudly. Because he found that the direr his circumstances became, the more clearly he saw God's power at work.

We are afflicted in every, but not crushed entirely.

We are perplexed over crises, but not driven to despair.

We get persecuted by men but never forsaken by God.

We got struck down as if by an arrow hitting us in midstride, but we are not destroyed. We get up and live.

For we are always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be seen through our bodies (2 Cor. 4: 8-10).

This past week I contacted several of our members if they would comment on the truth of this passage. I have some of their responses for you.

One woman who has been battling cancer wrote:

We have this treasure in jars of clay - Christ in us, our strength and power source. There have been times this year I have felt hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted and struck down. Whatever trial or challenge we face, He does equip us with His power. I never would have imagined I would be facing my fourth round of chemotherapy right now. Just last year between June and December, I had two major surgeries and 6 one week hospital stays for my 3rd round of chemo. It is only through His power I do not feel crushed, in despair, abandoned or destroyed. I am not saying I never feel these things, but I try not to allow them to stay and roam the recesses of my mind and heart. When I do struggle, I know it is because I am relying on my strength and not His all surpassing power in my life - and that is the power I want to reflect in my life. I remain, Firmly in His Grip.

A man who also fought cancer wrote:

Somewhere it is written that He said, "Relate to me as creature to Creator ... as subject to King and clay to Potter. Allow me to have My way in your life and rather than evaluating My ways with you, accept them thankfully." And I did. Was what happened to me a miracle of sorts? From stage 3 stomach cancer to nothing in three months, if it was not a miracle, at the very least it was "Jesus manifesting himself in this mortal flesh" with immediacy and style!

A couple who had to endure the loss of an adult child wrote:

My wife belongs to a group of mothers who have lost adult children that call themselves Cracked Pots: Blessed and Broken. The jars of clay in verse 7 reminded her immediately of that group and the second part of verse 9 is how she has chosen to experience her grief, recognizing the blessings and little miracles God gave during our daughter's lifetime and continues to give.

I pray daily for God to make strong my hope and confidence in His ultimate mercy. That trust in God's mercy enables me to live through those crushing and confusing feelings, knowing our daughter is with the Lord she loved and served so much better than I have ever been able to do.

A mother who lost a son to suicide replied:

We are the clay that God created that makes the pot that God molds that contains the treasures that God gave us to use for His Glory while we are here. God is the WHOLE package! He made us. He is in us. He guides us to do His work....I long for heaven now... to be with God and Jesus and our son. I knew before that I wanted to go to heaven, but now it is an ache in my soul. I feel so much closer to God since he died. I feel like I've had a glimpse of how Jesus felt when He was on Earth and/or how God feels as He sees us moving around down here like ants carrying this heavy load on our backs: the load of sin, the load of the evilness of the world, the load of deception that Satan so slyly gets us to believe because he appears to be so enticing that we can't do without whatever carrot he dangles in front of us. This deception killed my son. How disgusting is Satan in trying to convince our son that God was gone from his life and that he wasn't lovable because of his mental illness. ALL LIES!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

The GOOD news is that in seeing/feeling all of this horrible tragedy, GOD IS GOOD ALL THE TIME! So, am I OK, not really, but God has a plan for me

And one more, a woman related to this passage to a whole series of years in the life of her family, especially in the suffering of her brothers. One died. One battles addiction. Another is being shredded through a divorce. She writes that he "is now trying to fight off the suffocating darkness of melancholy while single parenting a daughter whose own pain and rage are manifesting in difficult behavior." So she reflects:

And these are only the big things! Such tragedies do indeed afflict, perplex, persecute and strike down. They have done so to me and to the people I love. They take you to the end of yourself and bring to your lips every single

“Why” question that humans have ever uttered. But they do something far more important at the same time – in fact, two things. First, they convince you that they cannot possibly be pointless – there must be a reason for the pain and agony of suffering. It simply cannot exist in a vacuum or be merely the randomness of randomness. And second, they drive you to God because you have no answers for the questions, no balm for the pain, no help or healing to offer yourself or others for the brokenness.

This passage gives me an answer to the question of “Why?” These tragedies have occurred so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal bodies and to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to me. In my own strength and in my weakness, I would be crushed, despair, feel forsaken and ultimately be destroyed, probably by leading a bitter, empty, cynical existence for the rest of my days. But from God and through Christ’s enlivening and empowering death on the cross I am given the ability to get back up, to keep going, to engage, to relate, to hope, to rejoice, to live and to love. And I am reminded that it is not for me or for my sake so that I will have a good life despite these painful events and setbacks but so that I can live in such a way that the light of the gospel will shine through me and display the glory of Christ. So that my jar of clay which is being cracked and battered on this journey through this world which has been tainted and broken by sin will hold up and will show that despite its shabby exterior, it actually holds a treasure and that that treasure gives it a purpose and makes it precious.

Two thousand years later, the truth of Paul’s words still undergirds our lives, even in the very worst of times. Christ is there with us. When we might despair, he is the hope. When we are out of strength, he is the power. When death is in our face, he is the resurrection and the life. The truth of Jesus holds, as our own members bear witness, even in the worst of times.

But let’s ask whether this only works in extreme circumstances. Or is Paul giving us a principle that runs through the whole of life, in good times and bad, in ordinary and extraordinary seasons of life? He tells us that we are *always* carrying about in our bodies the dying of Christ. This is a constant reality for us. He goes on to say that we are *always* being handed over to death for Jesus’ sake. This is the new normal for the Christian. There is not a time in this world where we will escape the dying process. In fact, giving ourselves to dying for Christ moment by moment is the very secret to living in Jesus’ power, and joy and hope.

Dying for Christ is the secret to living in Christ. I'll say that again with different words. Accepting that we are called to die with Christ and for Christ every moment is the key to living in his resurrection. The engine of dying and rising powers the Christian life in this world. How can this be so?

First, we accept the reality that from the moment we are born, we are dying. No one is getting out of this alive. We expect death. We accept its reality as the way of life in the world. We will age. We will face frailty. We will see others taken from us. We ourselves will pass. We do not deny it. Nor do we hasten it. We do not take our lives in our hands either to save them or be done with them. We commend our lives to Christ. We entrust our souls to a faithful Creator. We place ourselves moment by moment in his hands. We are the Lord's. Whether we live or die, we are his. We face the battle with age, with illness, with death with the deep peace that we have accepted what will come, placed ourselves in Christ's hands, and now view every moment granted as a gift. Each hour is a gift, not a right. And though we die, we know that we will live. For Jesus lives and we belong to him.

Second, we know that Christ calls on us to die to self daily. We are not called to the island comfort of being served. We are called to go out into the world and love. Every day, we will be asked to die in new and surprising ways. It may to hold your tongue. To get up and wash dishes even if you want to sit down. To read someone a story when you're so tired. Someone in your home or to a child at Buchanan or Gardere. Think of Paul's words in terms of love: "For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh." We give our lives away in love hour by hour and day by day. It's a kind of dying. And it leads to life. It leads to freedom and fulfillment we could never have otherwise.

Third, we know that we will face bigger trials than the wear and tear of daily life. It could be persecution. It could be accident. It could be betrayal. It could be illness. It could be sacrifice for another. But we are not alone. We carrying in us the dying God. We are joined to the suffering savior. He has given his life to the uttermost. He has undergone the full range of human suffering. He is with us, and we find him there most reliably when we turn to him in our daily dyings. In our trials, we know that Christ Jesus has been through suffering, so he identifies with us.

But let's take it one more place. In our afflictions, we learn how to identify with Christ. We taste something of what he went through for us. When we have to sacrifice for another, that little death gives us a taste of Christ's whole life of

giving himself for us. When we suffer bodily pain, we touch something of what he felt in his scourging and crucifixion. When we are misunderstood, we can then relate to what Jesus felt speaking the word of life and being deliberately misquoted or rejected. When we are betrayed, we learn a bit of what the Judas' kiss felt like on his cheek. And it's there, right there, in our identifying with Christ in his dying that the real resurrection power grows in us. It's great to learn that Christ Jesus identifies with me in my suffering. But it's even more powerful to learn that in my afflictions, I am identifying with the suffering of Christ on behalf of the world. I am drawing closer to him in his dying for us. And so he will work in me his rising, his everlasting life. He will use me in the lives of others to bring his salvation. He will use us, precisely through our suffering, to bring thanksgiving and glory to God.

We have this treasure, this treasure of knowing Christ Jesus, in jars of clay. So that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. For we always carry about in our bodies the dying of Jesus in order that the life of Jesus may be shone through us as well.