

June 30th, 2024
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Pastor Prieue
2 Corinthians 4:7-15 (NIV)

Jars of Clay

- 1) display God's power in our weakness.
- 2) reveal the life of Jesus in our mortal bodies.
- 3) speak about the treasure we hold

⁷But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. ¹²So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

¹³It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, ¹⁴because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. ¹⁵All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

I've got in my hands some shards of pottery from an archaeological dig site in Israel. I spent a week there on a hilltop in the blazing sun digging in the ground pulling these little pieces of pottery out of the ground. We'd throw them into a bucket and when the digging was done for the day, then we'd have to soak them in water and scrub about a thousand years worth of dirt off of them so the archaeologists could see whether there was any writing on them or anything special. Most of it wasn't special at all, except maybe a piece or two here or there or a handle that was a little more intact, but all of it helps them estimate the dating of the site. There were boxes and boxes of it that we collected and at the end of the week after they had glanced over it a little, they took it back to the site and dumped out all our hard labor in front of us because they didn't need it. Then they winked and whispered, "Sneak a few pieces in your pocket." Well here they are!

Sometimes there's enough of the pieces all in one spot that you can actually piece it back together and make the whole jar that had been shattered and left in the ground for a couple thousand years. Even then, other than being really old, the jar wasn't anything that special. Back then, they didn't have plastic jugs or glass bottles so it was just what they used to haul around water or wine or food. These jars were common, cheap, breakable, disposable, and as unglamorous as that all sounds, it's part of the point that the Apostle Paul is making when he says, **"We have this treasure in jars of clay."** (4:7) These are the kinds of unglamorous jars into which God ironically deposited the amazing treasure of his gospel message. That's kind of a weird, "foolishness of God" thing to do—to put something super valuable into a breakable and fragile container.

But realize now that we're not just talking about actual clay jars and pottery. Paul is using the image to describe us. **"We have this treasure in jars of clay."** We are the jars of clay. God has deposited the amazing treasure of his gospel message in us, weak and fragile sinners. But why? Why would he choose to use sinners like us to hold something so valuable, critical, and important to his plan of salvation? Paul tells us, **"We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."** (2 Cor. 4:7)

Did you know there's an Old Testament story about clay jars that proves this exact point—that the power comes from God. It's the story of Gideon, one of the judges who led Israel. There was a battle coming up and the Lord said to Gideon, "You have too many men." If you win with this many men, you'll think it was your own strength that did it. So he dismissed 22,000 men leaving 10,000. The Lord said, "Still too many! So he took them down to the water and chose the men who cupped the water in their hands to drink instead of drinking like a dog. Only 300 were left. Then comes the amazing part of the story. Gideon armed his men, not with swords but with trumpets, and empty clay jars, and torches. They sneakily lined up around the city of Midian with the torches inside the jars and then when they got the signal, they blew the trumpets and broke the jars and held up the torches and shouted, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!" And do you know what happened? The Midianites were so panicked that they turned on each other with their swords and then they fled! What's the point of the story? God's people won the victory without so much as a sword because they had God's all-surpassing power working for them.

That's our first point today. *1) Jars of clay display God's power in our weakness.* The military experts at Westpoint would never suggest ditching most of your army and going out to the battle with pots and musical instruments, just like you wouldn't advise somebody to keep their prized jewels in a glass jar. No, you put it in a strong steel safe! And we would prefer that God should make us into that strong steel safe and so we often argue with God about it. "God, why do you give me all these aches and pains that are such a nuisance? Why do you leave me with this terrible condition that saps the life out of me? Why won't you take the thorn out of my side?" But the answer is often like he told Paul, "**My power is made perfect in weakness.**" (2 Corinthians 12:9)

When God deposits the treasure of his word and grace in weak and frail vessels like us that should break under pressure, and then he allows pressure and persecution and hardships to come upon us, and it doesn't break us, well that's where God's power is displayed. It's what Paul could say from experience about being jar of clay, "**We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.**" (2 Cor. 4:8)

Paul was a man who had been through the ringer so many times over he had to just start summarizing it. "**Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.**" (2 Cor. 11:24-27). There was one time where the Jews stoned Paul to what they thought was death, dragged him outside the city, and left him for dead. Paul wasn't exaggerating when he said, "struck down, but not destroyed." Imagine the disciples surprise when they came out to get his body, and Paul got up, walked back into the city, and left the next day to preach the gospel somewhere else! Struck down but not destroyed! 1) God's supernatural power is displayed when his power upholds clay jars like us in our weaknesses.

Now that's the opposite of the way we'd like to think about ourselves isn't it. We want to appear strong, air-tight, and waterproof. We like to pride ourselves in having no leaks. You know, there's a piece of me that has spent my entire life trying to be the sturdiest, most dependable, reliable jar in the kitchen, the jar who got the best grades and played all the sports, the jar that can work hard and handle whatever comes my way. But a section like this forces us to stop and ask ourselves, "Do I give that glory to God or try to hog it for myself? Am I working to accomplish God's purpose in revealing the life and light of Jesus to others, or am I working to shine my own trophies?"

On the other hand, when I think back on my life and the times I've gotten to demonstrate the life of Jesus living in me, strengthening me, preserving me, they have not been the times I got to mount the podium to receive earthly accolades. No, they're the times I've been forced to ride in ambulances and sit in hospital rooms and stand by the gravesides of loved ones. It's the times when we have no strength left and nothing to do but collapse into the promises of God.

Those moments of hardship and suffering and death are by no means pleasant or desirable for us, but they are meaningful. They do have a purpose that God is accomplishing, and that purpose goes beyond just displaying his power, but also his grace to us in the life of Jesus. Paul says, **"We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then death is at work in us, but life is at work within you."** (4:10-12). That's point number 2) *we as jars of clay reveal the life of Jesus in our mortal bodies.*

It's kind of a paradox when you think of it. Normally a jar's purpose to hold stuff in it, so you don't want it to have cracks or leaks. But our purpose as jars of clay is not to be a leak-free container for God's word, but to show the Word's power and to reveal the life it gives us. So in that case, actually the more cracks and holes and leaks that are in the jar the better, because then more of the light of life can show through those cracks and more of the water of life can pour out of those leaks. And that seems to be the reason that God was pleased to put the light and life of the gospel of Christ into broken flawed sinners like us, so that his life would pour through the cracks in us into the lives of others.

Now here is where possibly the biggest jump for our faith comes in. It's the gap from living and enduring to speaking and sharing. At this point in our lives, we've probably seen enough to realize that we're going to have bumps and hardships along the way. It's hard enough to deal with weakness and suffer through those hardships well, but it's an even harder thing to speak about those things in a way that reveals Jesus to others and glorifies God. It's much easier to just grit and bear it silently, and maybe even become bitter at God in the silence, but God calls us to trust his promises and speak well of him, to be his witnesses in the midst of our suffering and weakness.

Paul quotes Psalm 16 when he says, **"I believed; therefore I have spoken.' With the same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence."** We, as the jars of clay into which God has deposited his saving message, are the only ones who can communicate that message to others. We have been granted the privilege to know that we will not be crushed or abandoned or destroyed because Jesus was crushed for our iniquities instead. He was stricken by God and afflicted. He was forsaken and abandoned to the place we should be so that he might present us pure and holy in God's presence. That will happen when we are raised from the dead as Christ was!

God has blessed us to know it, and because we know it, we must speak it, that others might know it too. That's our final point today. 3) *Jars of clay speak about the treasure they hold.* We can't afford to not speak, for the sake of those who don't yet know Christ. Paul recognized the opportunity that his sufferings afforded him to reach more people. **"All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God."** (4:15)

As you take this home with you today, think about it the next time you find yourself hard-pressed, and perplexed, and struck down. Think about who is watching you and what they will see as you suffer. Let them see a power that is not your own, and the life of Jesus revealed in your body, and let them hear you speak of the treasure God has given you in Christ. God grant the strength to frail jars like us to speak what we believe, for Jesus' sake. Amen