

10th Sunday after Pentecost (Year C)

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

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

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. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. 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. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

For those of you who have been to my office here at the church building, you might have noticed these four pieces of broken clay jars that sit upon my office wall. On each piece, the verse "2 Corinthians 4:7" is written upon it. I've carried these four clay shards with me ever since they were given to me in February of 2011, almost five and a half years ago.

I was working at the time at a very large church back down south. On a staff of about 30, I was at the "bottom of the totem pole." I was working as the intern for Children's Ministry. At the same time, I was enjoying (and enduring) my first year as a student at Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta.

In late winter of 2011, a scandal of sorts ripped through the church at which I was working. The details of this scandal are not important for this sermon. However, what is important is to know that this congregation was reeling from some difficult news, and they found themselves questioning the strength and resilience of their faith family.

The congregation was hurt deeply. I will never forget sitting in the chapel of the church one day when we were having a service of Lament and Healing. I sat next to a woman whose name I don't remember (it was a church of several thousand members and it was impossible to know everyone). However, she turned to me, knowing that I was a staff member, and said to me "You know what this feels like? It feels like someone came up to me and kicked me in the stomach."

Whether we like to admit it or not, the church is not immune to conflict and turmoil. Many of us expect the church to be a place of constant harmony, peace, and good-will - a place where there is nothing but sitting around in a circle, holding hands, and singing Kum-bah-ya. Some of us despair when conflict comes, thinking that it means the church has "failed" somehow. Sometimes, I will admit, that is true. However, many types of conflict are *not* the result of the church "failing." Often times, conflict is the result of the church taking seriously its commandment to preach the gospel in word and in deed. Sometimes, conflict is an inevitable part of being a family, which is exactly what we are as a congregation.

I've often found it remarkable that some people believe that church must always be devoid of conflict of any kind. Any relationship, whether it be a romantic one, a familial one, or a friendly one, has

conflict. We expect it. We understand it to be a natural part of any human interaction. Only the most naive person would be surprised when conflict inevitably enters a relationship. Why is it then, that we so often do not give the church the same understanding? Why do we expect the church to be, somehow, miraculously immune to conflict? When we do place that understanding upon the church, we are immediately setting the church up for failure. Instead, we are called to understand conflict as an opportunity to grow together, to practice radical love, and to learn to listen to one another and convey our thoughts in respectful, appropriate ways.

As the congregation I have been speaking of was reeling from the scandal, the senior pastor who, by the way, had not even been hired a year prior, decided to respond the following Sunday by preaching on today's passage from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians.

As we have discovered going through the other letters of Paul in the New Testament, it is crucial to understand the historical context of the letters in order to better grasp their contemporary relevance. The difficult part of reading Paul's letters is that it is similar to only being privy to half of a conversation. It's like reading the response to a letter without having access to the original letter. We have to work "backwards" in a sense to discern what was really going on.

Of all of Paul's letters in the New Testament, the task of discerning the historical context is the hardest with this particular letter. If you ever get a chance to sit down and read 2nd Corinthians in one sitting, you will notice that the content of the letter jumps around from topic to topic rather sporadically. There doesn't seem to be a cohesive "theme" as do many other letters penned by Paul's hand. Most biblical scholars are of the opinion that what we now know as the letter of 2nd Corinthians is actually a composition of several different letters that were, at some point, combined into one letter.

Today's passage seems to be concerned with just who we are proclaiming when we come together to worship God. Some people, apparently, had begun to confuse the proclamation of Jesus Christ with the proclamation of humans. Instead of thinking that we are called to proclaim Christ, the Corinthians had begun to focus more on the humans preaching that Christ.

The problem with doing this is that we begin to lose sight as to the One we trust. When we place our trust of and belief in the humans proclaiming the Word rather than Jesus Christ, the Word *himself*, we place ourselves in a position to be inevitably crushed when conflict enters the family.

Because of this, Paul reminds the Corinthians that "we do *not* proclaim ourselves, we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord." This is the Gospel that we are called to proclaim. We proclaim Jesus Christ who makes the gospel known *through us*. We proclaim Jesus Christ who makes his truth known not just despite of our brokenness but *through* our brokenness and *because of* our brokenness.

To continue this metaphor, the Apostle Paul gives us the image of treasure in clay jars. Back then, clay jars were used to contain everything from water, to food, to spices, and about everything else. Anyone who has ever made a clay piece of pottery knows that when you begin, the clay is soft and malleable, moist and heavy. However, once the pottery is formed into its desired shape, it gets fired at very high temperature and becomes hard and brittle.

Clay jars represent fragility and ordinariness.¹ First and for most, they are fragile because they break easily. Anyone who has ever owned a clay jar knows that it doesn't take much for a crack to appear.

¹ With thanksgiving to David Bartlett for this terminology in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1* (p. 425).

And once the crack begins, it only gets worse. Secondly, clay jars represented ordinariness. *Everyone* had clay jars, from the richest of the rich to the poorest of common folk.

So here we have the Apostle Paul saying that we, you and I, are clay jars, fragile and ordinary, who have been *chosen* to hold and transport a treasure, *the* treasure of Christ's Gospel to a fragile and ordinary world.

Perhaps we should take a moment to appreciate the radicalness of this notion. We are all, and I do mean *all*, tempted to come to worship and hide things. We don't like people to know how fragile we are. We don't want people to know how broken we are. A crack has shown up and we do our best to hide it. It is a small community and we fear what will happen if the word gets out that we are fragile.

Well, Paul seems to shout it from the highest tower. "We are fragile!" he claims. "We are broken and ordinary" he shouts to the Corinthians. Let us claim it. Let us claim it as a testament to the sovereign power of God who can use such broken people as us to bear the light of Christ into a broken world.

In fact, when you think about it, we do proclaim our brokenness and our fragility each and every Sunday. Each Sunday, during the prayer of confession, we confess before God and each other how we are like clay jars. We report openly and honestly to one another the cracks that have showed up in our fragile bodies by the result of our sinful nature.

Together, we join Paul and share with one another that we are indeed broken vessels.

However, the truly radical part is that, for some reason I'm not sure I'll ever fully understand, God chooses such broken vessels as us to proclaim the truth of Christ. We are broken vessels that bear the perfect light of Christ into the world so that, as Paul puts it, it may be perfectly clear "that this extraordinary power comes from God and does *not* come from us."

On the Sunday in which the congregation I was working at was to be told about the hurtful truth of what was going on, the head pastor, Pam, had pieces of broken clay pottery handed out to each member of the congregation. In the days prior to that Sunday, Pam had the staff sit down and smash pottery, and on each piece of pottery, the staff took a Sharpie and wrote down 2 Cor. 4:7: "*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.*" It is four pieces of such pottery that I have on display in my office and before you here today.

In this time of turmoil and conflict, of fear and anxiety, these broken vessels with this verse were used to remind us of Paul's words that we do not proclaim ourselves; that would, indeed, be foolish, idolatrous, and hopeless. Instead, we, broken vessels though we are, proclaim the perfect light and truth of Jesus Christ. We are honored and privileged to bear such a message. To use the words of Paul, we do not boast of our strength; but, rather, we boast of our brokenness so that the complete power of Christ might be shown to all people.

And what's more, this is not just an important truth for our congregations, this is an important truth for the world. When police are murdered. When unarmed black men are executed. When terrorists strike here and abroad. When we see racism uncloak itself in our politics and our nation's dialogue. When all of these things happen, we are tempted to shift to fear because we are tempted to make the proclamation be about ourselves.

Instead, we are to shift to hope because our proclamation, our hope is not in the broken vessels, but in the unbroken and perfect message contained *within* us as the fragile clay jars. Yes, we may be

cracked. Yes, we may be fragile. Yes, we may be ordinary. But our hope is not in our brokenness but in God's power of complete reconciliation and righteousness.

Friends, you and I have this treasure in clay jars such as ourselves so that we do not lose hope. May we be a congregation that is perfectly clear in our proclamation that we do not proclaim ourselves but we proclaim the Savior Jesus Christ who has called us together to bear his message to a broken clay jar known as the planet earth and her inhabitants.

Friends, things are not easy right now. We turn on the news and we see hate. We look around and we see racist rhetoric and we are startled that we are a part of it whether we realize it or not. There seems to be so much division, so much fear, and so much tension between the peoples. But let us not despair:

As Paul puts it in today's passage,

*We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed;
perplexed, but not driven to despair;
persecuted, but not forsaken;
struck down, but not destroyed;
always carrying in the body the death of Jesus,
so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.
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.
So death is at work in us, but life in you.*

Friends, remember that every crack in a broken vessel gives more opportunity for the light within, the light of Christ, to shine! Every time racism deepens a crack in the vessel, may we be the vehicles that shine the light where it is needed. Every time politicians tempt us with fear, let us respond with hope. Every time we are tempted to proclaim ourselves, let us hold one another accountable that we may proclaim Christ. Together, let us bear every affliction trusting in the power that comes from within us but is *not from us*.