

June 3, 2018
2nd Sunday after Pentecost
II Corinthians 4:5-12/ Psalm 139
The Rev. Carenda Baker

The words we have heard from Paul's second letter to the believers in Corinth are, in my mind, among the most encouraging and uplifting words in all of Scripture. They speak to the faithful consistency of God's loving care from the first day of creation up until the present moment. *"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."*

Can you imagine it? The exact same power that brought light into being at the beginning of time is now offering light to illumine us, is in fact shining through us like sunlight streams through a window. Light that banishes darkness.

Light. And then treasure. What is *"this treasure"* Paul goes on to mention? If it's real treasure, it's got to be something precious, maybe even rare. Like a buried and sunken chest of gold coins, or a cache of gemstones – sparkling emeralds, diamonds, sapphires, rubies, and pearls. Expensive. Exquisite. Beautiful. *TREASURE*. Desirable. Valuable. Irreplaceable.

"This treasure" Paul writes of is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And he says it's ***IN* us. In **US****. We are containers of holy treasure. It sounds so odd for treasure to be kept in "clay jars" (or as some translations put it, "earthen vessels"). Who would think to look in an old clay pot for the family jewels or anything else of significant worth? Isn't that akin to stuffing all our money under the mattress?

When Paul talks about the treasure being kept in clay jars, he is doing some hard self-reflecting on the very real limitations of human ministers. All ministers (minister means every person who has been baptized) – all ministers are containers of treasure. Each of us individually – and us collectively, that is the Church – we are containers of treasure. "Clay jars". Common, ordinary, everyday vessels shaped out of dirt from the earth and water. Useful to be sure. Important for holding things. Yet fragile, prone to chipping and cracking, and tinged with imperfections. This is us, Paul says. We are together a bunch of clay jars, or if you prefer, cracked pots!

Humor is a good and appropriate response, because Paul is describing a reality about ourselves we would rather avoid. Calling his readers, his fellow Christians "clay jars" is not intended to demean them. It does not diminish the fact that every human being is created in the image of God. But Paul does offer the God's honest, naked, irrefutable

truth. We are all utterly human, flawed, fallible, imperfect, cockeyed and messed up in some way – and at the same time, as Psalm 139 says, “*we are marvelously made*” – or as another translation puts it, “*we are fearfully and wonderfully made*”.

Paul has been around the block. He knows how important it is to recognize and admit that we are creatures – created beings with limits. We are not God. But we are fearfully and wonderfully made, too, and given a critical purpose – to hold this treasure of the pulsing, brimming, rich life of Jesus the risen Christ, and to be directed by his Spirit. We are embodied bearers of the Christ on whose life we feed and from whom we drink every time we come to receive the Eucharist. This treasure, this Christ whose real being and presence we take into ourselves. *This TREASURE*. Us - cracked pots holding treasure – it’s amazing!

Well, wherever there’s good news, there’s apt to be some bad news also lurking, don’t you know? The bad news is that we have an awfully hard time accepting the good news! Sometimes we refuse to accept the good news. Instead, we expend so much time and energy, frittering away our lives, thinking the treasure thing is all about us. Not so from Paul’s perspective. Paul is about keeping “the main thing the main thing”. He dealt with it in the church in Corinth, a church he planted. Some folks were duped into believing, “Well I’m a bit prettier clay jar than she is. He’s a more sturdy clay jar than I am. I’m a more valuable clay jar than that one from “over there”. And - I’m just an old, dried out and brittle clay jar. I have only enough space inside to barely hold the treasure.”

About us clay jars, there are a few things to keep in mind. No matter how many gifts and abilities we have, our knowledge and insight are finite, limited to our time and place in history. We are all, every one of us, subject to selfish impulses, riddled with personal quirks, easily misled by delusions our own egos cook up and the opinions of us offered by others. Some of us think mistakenly that we are less worthy than we actually are, and others of us are convinced that we are “all that and a bag of chips”. In reality, there is something good about the worst of us, and there is something not whole, not well in all of us. There is not a single living human being who is in such perfectly great shape that he or she does not need the grace of Christ to make him or her more whole.

As clay jars we do have a critical God-given purpose – we are made to hold things. The treasure of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection has already been poured into us. It’s done - we’ve been signed, sealed, and delivered in our baptism. There are some clay jars, some earthen vessels who humbly accept their createdness. These folks seek earnestly to place themselves in the presence of an eternally creative, loving, faithful, gracious, forgiving and life-giving God. Yet they do not simply hold the treasure. They

open themselves to be filled, to be changed to reflect more of the light that shines within them from the presence of Jesus. These vessels over time reflect grace, forgiveness, self-giving love, patience, kindness, generosity, humility, and joy.

By virtue of our baptism we have been gifted, infused with this holy *treasure* – the power of Jesus' death and resurrection released and at work in us through the Holy Spirit – healing, reconciling, shining more goodness and light into the world. This is the treasure that we have been given. And still - we are fragile clay jars, so Martin Luther was spot on when he said "baptism is a once in a lifetime sacrament that takes the whole rest of our lives to complete".

Because we were created to contain something, all of us, because we're imperfect, can also cling to things other than the treasure of the Christ-life alive in us. We can become containers who harbor and brim over with envy, anger, disappointment, long held grief turned bitter, fear, loneliness, addictions, and dis-ease of all sorts.

I'm praying the Spirit will help us accept more deeply the reality that the imperfect church, still the body of Christ, and this Trinity Church as a smaller part of Christ's body, will in our life together be able to throw open our arms wide and say - "Y'all come! We are a hospital for broken people and cracked pots. Lost, grieving, lonely, struggling, searching, broken people. This is a place for every one of God's fragile, beautifully made, finite, and useful clay jars - because we all have been given the same treasure. Not as a result of our own actions. Not by our own power. Not because of anything we deserve, or have earned. But simply because God the Master Artist, God the holy Potter extraordinaire, has created us from love, for love. It's really that simple.

So, here's a question for all of us: How much more of God's love do we want to make room for in our lives as clay jars – we keepers of the treasure? How much more of God's life-transforming love are we willing to receive, in order to magnify the light shining from within us, reflecting the treasure of Christ who already lives there?

"I don't know", may be our answer. And that's certainly okay. It's honest. Others of us may be wondering, "Really? There's more? Well - I'm not sure what that could look like, or what it might require of me". And that hesitancy, that wondering is okay and honest, too. Be assured that no response we offer will be a surprise to God. And know as well that our brave willingness to open ourselves to receive more of the healing love that God has to offer will be a life-changer for us.

So, finally, I have a personal story to offer about the mysteries of being a clay jar. It is a “clay jar” story from our pilgrimage to Israel last November.

On the few days we spent in the region of Galilee, one of our scheduled visits was to Migdal, the area where Mary Magdalene, “Mary of Magdala” was believed to have lived. I was excited, even “stoked” as they say, ready and expectant for a beautiful experience in Magdala. We were to visit a religious center there called “Duc in Altum”, which means “launch out into the deep”, words said to Peter by Jesus as the disciples were fishing, words that marked a turning point as Jesus called the disciples to become “fishers of people”. Duc in Altum was fairly recently built as a center for Christians of all denominations to worship, pray, and celebrate Eucharist. The day before going to Migdal, we had visited Nazareth, and while there I bought an olivewood chalice. I intended to “christen” it in Magdala, there at the Duc in Altum center. We were scheduled to have communion there in the marvelous “Boat Chapel” that overlooks the Sea of Galilee. The altar is built to look like a boat, a visual reminder that Jesus spent a lot of time around boats, even preaching from a boat.

The Duc in Altum center is overseen by a Roman Catholic order of Franciscans. Several minutes before we pulled into the parking area, our Israeli local guide Adina was talking on the phone to an administrator in the center we were about to visit, to confirm our reservation time to celebrate the Eucharist in the Boat chapel, which had been pre-arranged. Adina finished her phone conversation, turned to me and said, “Bad news, Carenda. You won’t be able to have Communion in the chapel.” Long story short: It wasn’t a time crunch thing. It was an “institutional church” thing. And for me a gender thing. The administrative personnel had not received the requested preliminary paperwork and did not know that I was a woman priest. As the Roman Catholic Church oversees this center, no celebrating of the Eucharist by a woman would be permitted. They were sorry. We were welcome to gather in one of their other chapels for prayer. But there would be no celebration of Holy Communion there for our group of pilgrims.

Devastated is not too strong a word for what I felt.

I was dazed and stunned, and felt like I’d been kicked in the gut and had the wind knocked out of me. I mean – “Really? I am a lifelong Christian who has come all this way to see and experience the places where Jesus lived and walked. And other Christians forbid my celebrating Eucharist in the place that was the home of one of Jesus’ first women disciples, Mary of Magdala?”

The tears came – there was no way I could stop them. I had been so looking forward to having Communion there in that place, that exquisite chapel in Magdala, looking out

over the Sea of Galilee. It would have been the first time our pilgrimage group shared the Eucharist together in Israel.

Was it really the same Jesus all Christians call Savior, who was represented in those institutionalized policies of the Church? Was it really, even the same Lord, the same priceless treasure we all held in common? Sadly and in reality yes. *“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.”*

The apostle Paul knew about this sort of conflict and division among people. *“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.”*

Someone from our group suggested Plan B – we could have Communion on a real boat during our ride on the Sea of Galilee, which was our next scheduled activity that day. It was another “clay jar” moment. I simply could not pull myself together to offer Communion to my fellow pilgrims then. I had no sense of Jesus’ presence, though I was the same clay jar I had always been. Was Jesus feeling my pain, or was I feeling Jesus’ pain? I didn’t know. The precious treasure within me was there, hadn’t gone anywhere. But, I was simply too shattered and sad that who I am, my being a woman could be the source of such deep pain, and caused by others, other Christians, others part of the same body of Christ to which we belong.

“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.”

The next day our pilgrimage group travelled to a specially designed baptismal site called Yardenit, along the Jordan River. Here we would renew our baptismal covenant. We dipped our toes in the water, some walked in up to our knees. A few had brought small bottles to collect water from the Jordan to bring home. I was carrying in my trusty backpack (“the pack of penance” as Frank Stearn dubbed it), the chalice I had bought in Nazareth, which was still “unchristened”. And I had a small bottle of wine. But that morning I had taken out of my backpack the pita bread I carried with me the day before when I was prepared to celebrate the Eucharist in Magdala.

Well this was a beautiful day; we were in a beautiful place, and as it turned out, we had extra time there along the Jordan after we had renewed our baptismal vows, and been sprinkled with water from the river. One of our pilgrim group spontaneously suggested, “Why don’t we have Communion here?” Uh oh. “Here, now?” I said. “Yes, here now”,

some of the other pilgrims said. “Why not?” Okay, well I’ve got the wine and chalice, but I didn’t bring any bread. Could someone go find us some pita bread or any kind of bread in one of those shops we passed on the way in? Minutes went by as I set up an area on the stone ledge for Communion. And the dutiful disciples of Jesus returned with a small bag of peanut butter flavored cheese curls. “We couldn’t find any bread. This is the best we could do.”

Oh my, now this is unconventional. “W.W.J.D.?” – What would Jim do? Jim Turrell, my liturgics professor from Sewanee probably would not like this very much or approve. Only some very creative disciples would imagine the body of Christ could look a little bit different for us today. We proceeded to share in the Eucharist. And honestly, I had a difficult time not giggling as each person held out their hands and I placed in their hands the very Real Presence of Christ, looking every bit that morning like a peanut butter cheese curl.

We made our first Holy Eucharist together in Israel there along the River Jordan with gusto, gladness, joy and dare I say it? – glee. The treasure was there all the time, still held inside the clay jars, inside each of us gathered - in the hearts and bodies and souls of our pilgrim band.

“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.”

My dear friends, clay jars, cracked pots – every single one of us. Right here and now, this is the place especially for the broken, the searching, the ill and lonely to gather, and be reminded that God’s love is alive in us and we can have more. The love will never run out. All we need do is open our hands, and ask. “More please”.

May it be so.