

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON

A Treasure In A Jar of Clay

SCRIPTURE READING – II Corinthians 4:5-10

INTRODUCTION:

This morning's scripture reading is from the second letter to the Corinthians. The church in Corinth had been through severe battles and serious threats to their existence as they struggled to form an identity. To unite as Christians has never been easy. In every church there will be times of great joy and seasons of suffering, times of fullness and times of wandering in the wilderness.

Paul writes to these early Christians encouraging them to endure the struggles with humility and faith – not in ourselves – but in Christ. He explains that the true nature of ministry is indeed a high calling but never a straight or easy path. We come together as a frail and imperfect container to hold God's priceless treasure. Yet, in our sincere and faithful attempts to endure challenges and work through conflict, we will find that even this fragile container, that we call the church, can be a vessel of goodness and light - a beloved community. Through God's mercy we are invited to reflect the grace of God and collectively, our high calling is to serve the world as the body of Christ here and now.

Hear this reading from Second Corinthians, Chapter 4, verses 5 through 10.

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**SCRIPTURE:**

What we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Treasure in Jars of Clay! But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to 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 manifested in our bodies.

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May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. – Amen

About 25 years ago, I was living the dream. I was married to a beautiful, loving wife, we had two healthy and vibrant children, we lived in a nice, safe, suburban home. My career as a television director was rising steadily and the work was interesting, lucrative and sometimes even meaningful. I easily believed that all this good fortune and blessing was the result of my hard work, personal integrity and faithful devotion to God.

And then, in the space of one year, it all began to unravel. First, I sat helpless beside my Grandfather, who I adored, as he suffered greatly before his death. Shortly after, we watched our home burn along with all our possessions. That same week I ruptured a disk in my back. The pain was so debilitating that kept me from work and sidelined all physical activities. I felt exhausted and worthless. Everything that I thought defined my existence and self worth crumbled. A few months later I was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. The prognosis was not good - a 90% mortality rate. I fell into complete and utter existential crisis. After a lifetime of blessing, I suddenly found myself on the edge of a dark and powerful abyss that had already devoured all I thought was good and true. The abyss was pulling me closer day by day.

My family and friends were a great support and kept me from giving in. But still, I was confronted with my own weak vulnerability and utter powerlessness. Who was I if I couldn't provide for my children? How could I enjoy life if I couldn't play tennis, climb mountains, ski the bumps or even be useful around the house? And where was the God of blessing in the midst of my suffering and loss?

In the years that followed I was kept afloat by the persistent love of family and friends. There was more suffering to come, much of it by my own making. It took years of bitter resistance, struggle and desperate prayers for deliverance. Finally, when I was completely depleted and totally empty, I surrendered the fight. I came to accept that I am no more than a fragile and vulnerable jar of clay. My best intentions, talents, skills and gifts were not at all sufficient to protect my family or me from pain, suffering, loss or grief. It was only then that I came to truly understand God's love and mercy for me, just the way I am. The very moment I stared into that dark abyss, accepting my own powerlessness and failure, was the very same moment that I felt the Holy Presence. "Now we are ready to begin." She said. I was an empty, cracked vessel, not worthy of anyone's love or respect. And God said, "It's okay. All is forgiven. Let's begin again."

When I claimed the humility of my own imperfection and frailty, there was an ecstatic release, an awakening. I felt authentically and totally free. I came to understand that we are all jars of clay. No matter what the outward appearance projected, every one of us suffers and there is no escaping that we will all mess up along the way.

This is the good news of the Gospel. In God's economy, our worth is not defined by our ability to be perfect, our tax bracket, our intellectual ability or veneer of success. In fact, it is in our most vulnerable, imperfect moments that God's unconditional love for us is most clearly understood. When we are at our weakest is when we truly discover a remarkable love that knows no bounds and is scandalously unrestricted. To know that we are all fragile containers, unworthy, flawed and prone to selfishness, is to draw close to the God of endless grace and the only response is to extend that same grace to one another.

God has chosen to put this remarkable treasure in fragile jars of clay. We may look great on the outside, but TriCon Church is also a fragile jar. Yet God comes and fills us with mercy and goodness, humility and grace. Our existence and relevance belongs to God, not us. We come together as a frail and imperfect container to hold God's priceless treasure. And, in our sincere and faithful attempts to endure challenges and work through conflict, we will find that even this fragile container, that we call the church, can be a vessel of goodness and light - a beloved community. We simply need to love one another with that same humility and acceptance of our mutual imperfection. We can nurture one another without judgment or pretentious standards of acceptance. Only when we recognize our frailty and claim our humility we will become a vessel of hope, sailing on a stormy sea of uncertainty. Only then will we be powered by the winds of the Spirit and sustained by the treasure of God's love.

The communion table is the ultimate expression of God's grace. Here is where we come together and remember that we are empty vessels needing to be filled, and God comes near and says, "It's okay. All is forgiven. Let's begin again."

AMEN.