

We have these treasures in jars of clay...

God's message through the Word today, is a message of hope and encouragement as we continue to walk this Lenten Journey toward the cross. In Psalm 139, David has penned a wonderful reminder that by God's hand we are all fearfully and wonderfully made. God has made us in secret...God has knit us together in our mothers' wombs ... all our days have been entered in God's book before there was even one of them... oh what a wonderful picture of God's providential love and care for us!

And then in the New Testament, we are reminded "we have these treasures in jars of clay"... "we have these treasures in jars of clay..."

Clay jars...you may be thinking...I've been called many things before, but never a clay jar! If you look at the communion table today you will see different clay jars in all shapes and sizes and of all ages... tall ones, short ones, big ones, small ones, misshapen ones or

symmetrical ones ... Some of these jars are hardened and can withstand a lot of pressure ... others are very fragile and can easily crack. Is there a jar here that reminds you of you? Is there another jar that you would rather be? As Christians we have been likened to common clay jars... all fearfully and wonderfully made... How can we hold these seemingly opposite ideas in tension? Let's see how this sounds...fearfullyandwonderfullymadecommonclayjars? It doesn't exactly roll off the tongue does it?

In Paul's day, clay jars were the ordinary vessels that were used to hold something...the mismatched dishes if you wish...no matter the shape, the design or the condition, clay jars all had the same purpose...they were containers...they were designed to contain something... they held food...they held oil... they held candles...some jars held valuable items that a person wanted to store and yet some jars also held the household garbage. These were common vessels...they could be easily broken or chipped, or cracked. The potter designed these jars potter for a specific

purpose. A vase for flowers ...a pitcher for water...a bowl for fruit... a tea pot for tea.

Eugene Peterson's paraphrase in The Message sheds a spotlight on the metaphor of Christians being like clay jars. And I quote "We carry this precious Message around in the unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives. That's to prevent anyone from confusing God's incomparable power with us. As it is, there's not much chance of that. You know for yourselves that we're not much to look at. "

And those of us of a certain age who have many more miles on our tires might say AMEN to that thought...as we mature we are increasingly reminded of the fragility of human life. Our bodies often fail us ...our carefully made plans can be irretrievably stolen in an instant...our human vulnerability can be heartbreaking.

So this passage teaches that the treasure that we are made to contain in our physical bodies is “the glorious good news about Christ...Christ in us...the hope of glory”.

We have been designed so that others will be attracted to the treasure that is Christ IN us. We are designed to be full of God's spirit NOW- designed to spill out love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, loyalty, gentleness and self-control. Yes, in you, in me- weak, sinful, failing, wandering, fragile human beings...God in His wisdom has designed us this way to be vessels of God's choosing.

But we all face the same temptation....as sinful human beings , our tendency is to look at the outward person, the other clay jars around us, and compare ourselves with them. You might even admit to secretly coveting one of the clay jars that you see here today.

This tendency is reinforced on every side in our culture with the message that our worth is tied up in our outward appearance and in our success. One has only to spend a few moments in front of the

newsstands to notice the sheer volume of magazines that cater to this message to realize that this is true. Oftentimes we are unduly attracted by whatever we aspire to but could never attain. Some of us are impressed with people's credentials, or their life experience, or their personality, or their success on the job, or their athletic prowess, or their particular skills...If I were really honest, I would admit to wanting just a little more in the math department! But our power as Christians does not come from any of these things...it comes from the presence of God in our hearts... our power as Christians comes from the presence of God in our hearts.

We only have to watch the news or read the paper to see accounts of people whose jars of clay are empty inside. Many people feel as if they have little meaning or purpose in life; if pressed, they might admit that they feel as if they have nothing to live for; their hearts are full of emptiness and despair...as we know too well, even having celebrity status cannot satisfy the heart's desire to find meaning and purpose in life. Superficially people may be working very hard at

developing or sprucing up the best-looking clay pot on the block, but inside they feel empty and alone. And this type of despair can make people look for the world's way of filling up their clay jars- through accumulation of stuff, through climbing the corporate ladder, through addictions to any number of substances, through engaging in extreme sports... These are just some examples to which we can add many more. In nations around the world we have seen an increasing number of people adopting ideologies that glorify and promote hatred, racial discrimination, brutal violence towards innocent people and domination of others. Empty pots will fill up with something.... Empty pots will fill up with something.

We know that when a clay pot is well used in everyday living, it is often bumped, jostled, chipped, cracked, dropped or even broken. And the older the pot gets, the more likely it is to be cracked or broken. It is in this everyday living experience that the contents of our clay vessels spill out to others. It is the extraordinary power of God that should spill out when we are jostled and bumped and

cracked. This word Power here in the Greek comes from the word dynamite!

There is a common misperception that Christians should expect to be exempt from being touched by the problems of the world.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. The apostle Paul says that we will all experience those things that are common to humankind such as afflictions, perplexities, persecutions and catastrophes.

It is through these pressures that God forms our godly character...God is only looking for our willingness to carry God's presence as a light to the world...he desires pots that are appropriate for the master's use. And it is through the pressure in our lives that causes our pots to crack, that God's light can be manifested to others. As Leonard Cohen admonishes us in his song...Anthem

Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack, a crack in everything

That's how the light gets in.

So this all sounds very good in theory, but what does it really mean in practice, for us, on a day- to- day basis...As Francis Schaeffer said, how shall we then live?

I believe that God is calling us to be willing to have our jars of clay cracked or even broken, so that His light can spill out. The secret is to want to be a vessel for God to use and to fill. In the words of the hymn, Have Thine Own Way, we need to ask God's spirit to mould us and make us after his will, while we are yielded, waiting and still. Our human tendency, to put "self" in the centre of everything, has to be broken... this is not a one-time only proposition, but a lifelong journey.... as we put our sinful natures to death, and allow Christ to shine through us, then "rivers of living water" will begin to flow out of each of us.

I believe that God's message to us today is very specific... did you catch it? ... rivers of water will flow out of each of us... every pot has an important purpose... thankfully there is no best-before date with God...no one is too young or too old... This truth is shown week after week in our church as God shines God's light out through all of our lives in community- in our infants and toddlers who do not do anything at all except BE...through their innocence, and sheer "cuteness", through our children in their uninhibited worship of God, through our adolescents in their curiosity, development and service to God, through our adults in their management of life - family, work, community and church life... and through our seniors in their wisdom, their patience and their tenacity in the face of the challenges associated with aging amongst many other things.

I recently watched a video of Billy Graham, at age 95 years old, still as passionate about preaching the gospel as when he was 25...

granted, he was not standing in front of thousands of people, but rather sitting in the comfort of his own home. Physically weakened by old age and Parkinson's disease... you could still see the passion in his eyes and hear it in his voice. God wants to use your common clay jar regardless of your age for God's purpose. When I mused out loud if I was too old to pursue God's call to ordained ministry, I was reminded that whether or not I obeyed God's call to the ministry, with what seemed at the time to be a long, arduous and challenging 3-year formation at seminary, in the same time frame, I would still be 60 years old either way!

I'd like to finish up by telling you a story written by Jim Cyr that will illustrate what I am trying to say.

A water carrier in India had two large clay pots that hung from opposite ends of a pole he carried across his shoulders. One of the carrier's pots had a crack in it. The other pot was perfect and always arrived after the long walk from the stream to the master's house

full of the precious water. The cracked pot, on the other hand, arrived only half full, and as a result, the water carrier always delivered one full pot and one half pot of water.

The perfect pot was proud of its ability to fulfill the purpose for which it had been made. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its imperfection, and miserable that it could only fulfill part of the purpose it had been made for. After two years of bitter failure, the cracked pot spoke to the water carrier, saying, "I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you."

"Why?" asked the water carrier. "What are you ashamed of?"

"I deliver only half my load. The crack in my side lets water leak onto the ground as you carry me to your master's house. So you don't get the full value of your efforts because of my flaw."

The water carrier felt very sorry for the old cracked pot and he said, "As we return to the master's house today, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path."

Then he trudged up the hill with the two pots across his shoulders. For the first time, the cracked pot noticed the beautiful wildflowers along the path and they cheered it immensely. When they reached the master's house, the water carrier said to the pot, "Did you notice the flowers on your side of the path, and how there were none on the perfect pot's side? I have always known of your flaw, and I took advantage of it by planting flower seeds. I knew that, as we walked back from the stream, you would water them. And, for two years now, I have picked these beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table."

Without your being just the way you are, he would not have had this beauty to grace his house."

You see, God in his wisdom has chosen to reside in us, jars of clay, broken, cracked and chipped though we are... Remember God's standard is not perfection... "God uses broken things. It takes broken soil to produce a crop, broken clouds to give rain, broken grain to give bread, broken bread to give strength. It is the broken

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alabaster box that gives forth perfume.” Through our human weaknesses, the transcendence of His power will be shown before everyone, so that all may see the Light of our Lord Jesus Christ in us, and come to Jesus, whom to know is life eternal. AMEN