

2 Corinthians 4: 5-12

Pymble 3.6.18

***Confusing treasure and clay jars***

In 1946, a Bedouin shepherd near the Dead Sea in the Holy Land lost one of his goats. As he searched, he saw a cave opening up a small rocky hill, difficult to access. So thinking his goat may have wandered in there he threw in a rock to see if he could coax it out. Expecting to hear either the bleat of a goat or the thud of rock hitting ground, he instead heard a distinctive “clink”. And upon investigating the shepherd made one of the greatest archeological discoveries of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: dozens of clay pots containing hundreds of portions of Hebrew Scriptures; some small fragments, others full texts; all left there from the first century Qumran community. The jars were like the ones in the photo on the order of service – simple clay pots used for all sorts of things back in the day – and it was their qualities, plus the lack of humidity in the air in that part of the world, that preserved the texts. Indeed over the next decade or so 981 different manuscripts were discovered from about a dozen caves – all now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. This was an absolute gold mine for archeologists and Biblical scholars and the discovery continues to provide rich material for study and research.

But here’s the thing: once the discovery had been made the pots were no longer important and they would have been readily discarded in order to focus on the material they contained. The pots had done their job by preserving, and we might even say, delivering the manuscripts to the present day. The real interest was in the archeological treasures the pots contained.

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Completely unrelated to the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Apostle Paul uses the image of treasure contained in clay pots in his letter to the Corinthians. As a means of contrasting the treasure of the gospel with the sometimes fragile experiences of his life and ministry,

Paul simply says *“we have this treasure in clay pots”*.

Yes, God is powerful; the gospel is glorious,

but as bearers of the gospel,

Paul and his companions are often

*afflicted, perplexed, persecuted and struck down.*

This is consistent of what we know of Paul’s experiences

from his writings and from the book of Acts –

at various times he was arrested, imprisoned, beaten, whipped,

stoned and suffered a “thorn in the flesh” – whatever that was.

And it is not too great a leap for us

to see the church today as that clay pot,

still bearing the treasure of God’s good news to the world.

**But let us see, the church itself is not the treasure.**

The treasure, as Paul says, is *“the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”*

Today we might simplify that as saying

the treasure is all the good stuff from God:

new life, freedom from that which binds,

reconciliation with God and each other –

all because of Jesus Christ.

In looking at this passage, Walter Brueggemann identifies the treasure as:

*forgiveness in order to start again, in a culture where every score is kept;*

*generosity, in a society dominated by scarcity-thinking;*

*come-as-you-are-hospitality, in a time when we are only encouraged*

*to be hospitable to those who are the same as us;*

*and justice that protects the weak and vulnerable not just the wealthy.* <sup>1</sup>

The treasure is the stuff that everyone desires;

it is that which will satisfy deepest needs;

it is God’s self giving poured out for the sake of creation.

It is God’s heart of love revealed in Jesus.

**And everything else is the clay pot.**

**All the rest is simply the container.**

The denominations and regulations;

the buildings and the budgets;

the rosters and the pews;

the organs and the hymn books;

the committees and the agendas;

the ministers and the colleges that train them;

the church bureaucracies and the mission plans;

everything else is the container that holds the precious treasure.

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<sup>1</sup> “Getting Smashed for Jesus.” Sermon delivered May 19, 2014, at the Festival of Homiletics, Minneapolis and published by WorkingPreacher.com

And one of our problems is  
that we confuse the container with the treasure.

Firstly we imagine that the container is so beautiful  
that it will never change.

We think that our style of worship should last forever,  
that a particular denominational trait is unchanging;  
or that local church structures are eternal.

But all these things are part of the fragile container –  
subject to decay; open to change.

And secondly, in focusing on the container  
we can overlook the surpassing value of the treasure.  
Indeed we can forget the treasure altogether if we aren't careful.  
And thirdly, because we are focusing on the wrong priority  
we think it a disaster when the container is looking vulnerable  
or when cracks begin to show, but you know, it is only a vessel;  
there is something far more valuable  
that we are gathered around as Christ's people.

In our day, the vessel of church as we know it is starting to show its age;  
let's face it, it has done a lot to damage itself;  
it is looking vulnerable, and who knows, it could even break down.  
But even that would be OK;  
because it is only the container of the beautiful stuff that is the real deal,  
the stuff that can transform lives and change communities;  
the treasure of the gospel that brings new life and freedom.  
And what's more, God the Potter can create a new clay pot just like that.

And in amongst our vulnerability  
there is something else the treasure does:  
it helps us live with the tension of this present difficult moment.  
It means we can be afflicted, **but not** be crushed;  
the treasure enables us to be perplexed, **but not** to give into despair;  
it allows us to be persecuted, **yet** know we will never be forsaken;  
and though we are struck down at times,  
it helps us understand **we will never** be destroyed.  
We might say whilst not protecting us from trouble and difficulty,  
the treasure preserves us from hopelessness and total defeat  
because in focusing on the treasure, we are seeing life as God sees it.

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So I wonder what you will take away today?

One, I hope this renews your commitment to the treasure.

Let us focus on the value of life with God,  
of freedom in Christ,

of the strengthening of the Holy Spirit,  
of being reconciled with God and neighbour,  
of the joy of being known and loved by God.  
These are the things that will sustain us,  
especially when we are tried by the harsh events of life.

And two, let us not over-invest in clay pots.

The value of the container is that it preserves the treasure  
just as those clay pots near the Dead Sea held and preserved  
the manuscripts until they were discovered.

In the same way the value of the church is that it is a vehicle  
for the good news of God.

We are to hold and preserve the gospel  
and make it available to those around us.

To overinvest in bricks and mortar, in staff and strategy,  
in finance and programs

that do not have at their heart, the treasure of the gospel  
is to court disappointment and despair and to waste precious resources.

We hold lightly to all elements of the container  
because we know the container itself is transitory and fragile.

I have to say, this is something that has been central  
to the thinking of Village Planning Group.

We have had to ask ourselves:

do we really want to propose challenging changes

if all we are doing is rearranging structures and finances?

Do we really wish to suggest significant and possibly controversial change  
only to slightly alter the look of the clay pot?

No! We have decided we are not interested in externals.

Rather, our motivation is the hope of enabling gospel treasure  
to flow in new and relevant ways to our community.

And maybe in order for that to happen,  
the clay jar might even require a bit of re-molding  
or even a well-placed crack here and there.

But as we commit ourselves to God,  
he will find the way of dealing with the jar  
to enable the treasure to flow.

So let us trust and commit ourselves to the wisdom and skill of the potter,  
who knows all about pots and the treasure he places within them.