

Psalm 19

2 Corinthians 4:5-11

Rev. Irene Pak Lee, preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen, October 8, 2023

Jars of Clay

I recently returned from a week away at a Presbyterian Camp and Conference center in Little Rock, Arkansas, where along with a team of faculty, we welcomed and led 26 newly ordained ministers of word and sacrament in a week-long retreat. Sponsored by the PCUSA Board of Pensions, CREDO, as the conference is called, is designed to support pastors actively serving in churches and provide them with some tools and time for assessment to look at the wholistic health and wellness of their lives. Categories of care and assessment include spiritual health, financial health, physical & emotional health, and vocation and leadership. For one week, participants have their own rooms, food is made and provided (no dishes to do!), the schedule includes personal time and is not jam packed, and all of it takes place in a lovely outdoor away from everything setting. I remember attending my own CREDO several years ago and was reminded what a gift it is simply to have space and time to reconnect with who you are.

The common theme I heard as the vocational leadership faculty in my plenaries, workshops, and one-to-one conversations was the struggle with balancing ministry and any kind of relationships, discernment around whether it was time to stay or time to go, and what might be a realistic expectation to have as leaders. But the one I heard over and over again in almost all of my conversations was about burnout. These pastors, who are only 1-5 years into ordained ministry are burned out or burning out fast. According to the Barna Group, as of March 2022 the number of pastors who have considered quitting ministry within the past year was 42 percent. Most of it related to the immense stress and isolation and loneliness in their work and what they were trying to do as they lead. Simply being invited to reconnect with their heart and blessing them brought so many to tears. They were feeling dry, cracked, and broken and simply receiving instead of giving for one week was a gift for many of them that they might not have known they needed.

The conference was for ministers, but the reality of what I just shared with you about their experience I'm sure resonates with many of you too. Especially if you are in any kind of caregiving profession or caregiving role, you know what it means to feel depleted and a week away where you have space, don't have to cook and can reconnect with yourself again probably sounds really good too. Any kind of life defined by service and giving can easily go from one of joy to one of burnout and forgetting who we truly are and why we do what we do. So if you're in that place today, how do you reconnect again to who you truly are? Where do you find that

strength or know that your life has a strong purpose even when you are pouring yourself out through the cracks of your lives?

In our scripture lesson today from 2 Corinthians, we get this motivational talk from Paul. It starts out strong and inspiring: “Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your servants 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.

He continues, “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.”

Treasure in jars of clay. This light, this power, this grace and glory is stored up in clay jars, friends. And because you’re all smart, you know that what Paul means here is us... we are the jars of clay in which this treasure resides. We radiate light and knowledge of the glory of God.

So at first read, it sounds pretty cool. But here’s the thing. I do not know a lot about pots or jars, but I do know that in my experience, clay jars are super fragile and breakable. They’re usually pretty cheap and porous. They crack easily and I think you have to even be careful about how you water plants that are in clay jars. And so then when you pause with this imagery, clay jars seem like a poor choice for treasure and ensuring its sustainability and safekeeping. Why didn’t Paul use the image of an iron vault for this treasure instead? Doesn’t that make more sense? Aren’t we supposed to be strong and resilient and tough in order to sustain and give and share God’s love and mercy?

The Rev. Andrew Foster-Connors reflected his own hypocrisy in this passage.

“I feel conflicted by Paul’s words,” he wrote. “This sense that we are just cheap jars is certainly not the assurance that I’ve been giving to my children. And I don’t think I am the only one. [So many of us tell our children] how valuable they are, how precious their lives are, how significant they are to us, and how significant they will be to the world. We build up their self-esteem. I’ve never called them or anyone else nothing but cheap, clay pots. . . . Still,” he continued, “Paul’s cheap jars image [might actually be] more truthful [than] what I’ve been telling my children. Life is not going to last forever. We age. We struggle with loss; with disability and disappointment; with the limits that we come up against in ourselves and in our politics. And following Jesus isn’t going to make us any less fragile. If anything, feeding, clothing, and loving the poor is going to cost you something. Resisting the demonic forces of greed and racism on the rise in our culture, sometimes poisoning our hearts, is

going to cost you something. Investing your time to strengthen Christ's body, the church, is going to cost you something. [None of that leads to an easier life]." Friends, the truth of who we are is closer to Paul's truth than we might want to admit.

Paul's imagery and message of strength in vulnerability and brokenness did not fly well in his own culture either. Sometimes the context between the time the passage was written and our own is completely different, but in this case, it's still very similar. We'd rather hear messages about how we can be an iron vault rather than admitting to the ways in which we are broken or fail. Paul gives this countercultural response and does not shy away from the message of conflict, weakness, suffering and brokenness. He does not get rid of that pesky cross.

We do not know what the Corinthians made of his countercultural response. But really, all Paul was doing was leveling with them. He was honestly sharing with them the truth about all of us. None of us has it all together and we do not need to have it all together in order to live a life of service.

Theologian and scholar Kate Bowler writes about that vulnerability in all of us: "What would it mean for Christians to give up that little piece of the American Dream that says, 'You are limitless'? [because, after all,] everything is not possible. The mighty kingdom of God is not yet here. What if 'rich' did not have to mean 'wealthy', and 'whole' did not have to mean 'healed'? What if being the people of 'the gospel' meant that we are simply people with good news? God is here. We are loved. It is enough." Jars of clay entrusted with a treasure that shines through all of our cracks.

Friends, this idea that we have to have it all together in order to be good or of service or useful is the one that we need to release today. Especially if you are in any kind of caregiving role right now where you have to hold even more than just yourself, the chains of perfection need to be broken so that you do not burnout and so that you can continue the good work our God in Christ has already begun in you.

Because you see, that's where the good news today lies. The good news is the gift of imperfection, the gift of being nothing more and nothing less than a cheap jar, a clay pot. I probably should have told you earlier, but in Paul's time, earthen vessels, clay pots, were the most imperfect vessel in which one could carry food and drink. Whatever one was carrying would spill all over the place, because those vessels were literally cracked pots. They were absolutely inefficient and a bad choice for the task of carrying something valuable. Yet, as Paul reminds us, it is precisely into our cracked jars of clay selves that God has chosen to place the treasure of God's grace and the promise of God's healing and wholeness for all. Through the cracks of our

lives, God's light shines out. And friends, that IS good news for us this day-it's good news for the reality of our every day lives, it is good news for our caregiving selves.

I want to close with this lovely story as we reflect on connecting with strength in our weakness.

A woman had two clay pots. Each hung from a pole that she carried and they swayed as she went to fetch water each day. One was cracked and leaked. One was perfect and always delivered its fill. The cracked pot was ashamed. The perfect pot was proud. And so life continued for the leaky pot until one day the owner explained. I know you leak as I carry you. But haven't you noticed? I planted flowers on your side of the path. As I walk with you, you water the flowers. And I've used these beautiful flowers to decorate my home. Without your imperfection there would be no flowers.

Friends, instead of obsessing over our cracks today, can we see the ways in which we gift those around us just as we are? We are all flawed and unique. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. Notice the flowers of your imperfections for our God can use our weakness and limitations.

God is trusting us to be and hold the treasure. God is trusting you to be and hold the treasure. God is trusting our church—our congregation—to be and hold the treasure-not because we are perfect, but because God can use the reality of where we are for God's glory, mercy, justice and love.

And so may the cracked-jars of clay reality give us all courage and hope and freedom this day to reconnect with who we truly are, carrying the light and love of Christ-and may that be enough for you this day and light enough for the next step. Amen.