

CLAY JARS AND EARTHEN VESSELS

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Psalm 27: 1-9, 13-14;

II Corinthians 4:1-15

St. Paul was a man who was painfully aware of his limitations and his vulnerabilities. If ever there was a clay jar holding an immeasurable treasure, it was he. After all he had switched religions. He had served time in jail. He was notorious on the circuit as a troublemaker. Bothered by some emotional or physical malady, his “thorn in the flesh” as he called it, it seemed to preoccupy his thoughts. Perhaps, as a result, he was more than a little neurotic. I am not sure if, judged by appearance or reputation he could have passed muster as a candidate for pastor of any church of which we might want to be a part.

But there were even more serious problems than appearances with Paul, there were issues of character. You may remember that he started out as something of what we might call a right wing religious terrorist today. He was a zealot of the most frightening nature, a Pharisee bent on persecuting and killing Christians. We have read the stories.

I need only remind you of that awful account in the book of Acts in which we hear described the death of the first of the martyrs, Stephen, who was stoned to death, with Paul consenting, holding the coats of those who delivered the death penalty. It was a bloody business, and Stephen died with nothing but a blessing on his lips for those who murdered him.

Later in the same chapter, we hear of Paul and his ravaging of the church, entering house after house, dragging off men and women and committing them to prison.¹ His rage at these first disciples was so great that “breathing threats and murder against [them], he went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogue at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”² No Al Qaeda operative had a more aggressive plan than did Saul before he became Paul.

We also know of Paul’s conversion that day on the road to Damascus, on his way to do harm, when God meant to do good. You will remember the appearance of the risen Lord to him asking, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” His blindness and muteness for three days. And the rest, as they say, is history. Paul was a clay jar in which a priceless treasure was entrusted.

Paul agreed to be ambassador of the gospel to the Gentiles, but his ministry placed him at the center of many mixed congregations of both Jews and Gentiles. It was Paul who founded those little churches in Rome and Philippi, and Thessalonica, and Galatia, and Ephesus and Colossae and on around the Mediterranean basin.

Each church seemed to call out different qualities in him. He went to Thessalonica, and maybe because it was his first church it was also his favorite; a kind of first love for him. His letters to them were love letters.

The Roman Christians called forth his best theological thinking, a clarifying discussion of law and spirit that would serve as the gold standard of theological excellence for time immemorial. And did you know that he wrote to that congregation having never met any of them, yet still serving as their counselor and advisor?

The Galatian church puzzled and frustrated Paul and it was all he could do at times to hold back his dismay at them. In fact at one point he lost it, threw the inkwell at the wall shattering it in pieces as he cried out, "You foolish Galatians. Who has bewitched you?"³ In other words, "How stupid can you be?"

But it was the Corinthian church that most broke his heart. He agonized over that little congregation, so worldly, such an odd mixture of unlikely people, so contrary in nature and given to the teaching of just about any preacher blowing through town, they forsook his instruction and divided over petty issues that swept among them like firestorms.

They were rude to each other at times, these Corinthians, eating all the bread and drinking all the wine of the Eucharist before everybody could arrive, leaving the working folks coming in after their jobs hungry without a scrap to eat.

They argued about whether it was necessary to become a Jew first, before you could become a Christian, which for the Gentile men meant that they would have to be circumcised, an unpopular idea for a grown man needless to say.

There were heated discussions about whether you could eat meat offered to idols or whether they were inherently pagan once offered on a foreign altar. Paul gave practical advice. Meat is meat, he said. Pagan sacrifices are nothing. Go ahead and eat, but do not hurt those who are sensitive to such concerns. Better to abstain on their behalf than to eat what offends.

And the Corinthian church was a very status conscious church, impressed with money and station. Lots of Henri Bendel handbags and Gucci shoes, right in there with the folks in Birkenstocks and blue jeans and actors greasepaint. Most of us here at this church would have felt at home in the social mix that was there, it was so diverse.

But it was not easy being in that congregation because rather than reveling in their differences and enjoying them as we do, they were troubled by their differences. There was always an undercurrent. The intellectuals and the working types kept their distance from one another, the Jews were suspicious of the Gentiles, the Jewish women segregated from their men when they gathered, the Gentiles wondered what *that* was all about. The mixing of cultures went badly sometimes. And at one point the Corinthians became so peeved at Paul their relationship almost crashed, until Paul wrote what he called his letter of tears to explain himself.

It comes in the second letter to the Corinthians these words that are almost embarrassing to hear they are so confessional. “I wrote you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.”

It was Corinth of all the churches that Paul founded that caused him the most anguish. And yet... and yet there is such affection between this pastor and his congregation that it is clear that the bond between them was deep and the respect was heartfelt. If Paul was himself an earthen vessel, so was the church into which he poured the gospel... a clay jar, an earthen vessel.

We always think church life should be so good, so perfect. Everybody making nice together. No problems. Everyone mutually supportive. The visitors get a smile and a little tote bag with memorabilia. A little bible. A pencil with the church’s name on it. A note pad for little Christians to scribble on. A pledge card tucked discretely inside.

In that ideal church people who’ve been around a long time are always warm and welcoming of the newcomers and the newcomers just feel welcome instantly. Everybody is happy. It’s a little taste of heaven.

But the truth is, church life is not easy. The church is filled, after all, not with people that *we* want, our kind of folks, but the *people* God wants, God’s kind of folks, which (thanks be to God) is all of us.

People off the street, off the busses and subways, out of the neighborhoods, anybody that can make it in. Some folks who come to church are a little eccentric, a bit crazy, not quite themselves all the time. Others are barely hanging on, or in. Some are very different from ourselves. We don’t all look the same or live in the same neighborhood, and I have found that everybody in the church has an opinion about something, and is not reluctant to let others know.

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore,”⁴ Emma Lazarus wrote in her poem, and so Lady Liberty proclaims to all who approach the harbor.

Jesus put it this way to all who would approach the church, “Come to me all you that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.”

Who comes to church? In this day and age, when the social necessities have been laid aside, those who come to church are those who are *seeking* and *looking* and *thankful* and *hoping*, and *yearning* and *offering* and *learning* and *waiting* and *watching*.

So many people these days talk about being spiritual. But not many speak of being religious. So not everyone who comes to church, or at least this church these days, is necessarily religious, but they are in some sense spiritual and seeking and willing to be together to pursue both their faith and their doubts.

President Obama this week said that “we are no longer a Christian nation; we are now a nation of Christians, Muslims, Jews and Hindus - and non-believers.”⁵ And he is

right. We live in a time when the doctor no longer needs to be seen in church each Sunday in order to maintain a respectable practice and a reputation in town. It's only politicians these days in election season who keep up that practice. In New York we don't usually know that much about each other anyway, though in time I have come to know that my muffin man is Muslim, and my dry cleaning lady is a devout Korean Christian.

Those who come to church, come not for respectability any more, but for deeper, more substantial, more immeasurable reasons, sometimes reasons even we ourselves cannot adequately articulate.

We come to church to be a part of a discipline that makes life have resonance and meaning. We come to worship and pray and sing and serve in a way that connects our life with unseen things, things bigger than we are.

We come because we need to be with others in this lonely, rumbling, rambling, anonymous city where the only people who speak to you on the street are the hawkers and petitioners who ask if you have a minute for the environment, or gay marriage, or animal rights or something so important that a moment would not be enough and a lifetime would be too little.

We come to be together in our faith and in our doubts, because we are better off hearing others confess the faith when we cannot, and greater when someone reassures us that the ground beneath us and the heaven above us are a seamless creation and firm as well.

We come because there is a song in our heart that needs to be sung, a hymn of praise that had someone not already composed the tune or written the words, would still be in us needing to be expressed, because life is so important and so good that it must be praised, and so must its Creator.

We come because we want our children to have roots in spiritual soil, to have values to bring to bear in a city and a world that has a lot of values and not all are good ones. We come because we know that we are something more than what the culture tells us we are, *consumers*, and that the purpose of life is to consume and purchase and own. And the myth is that we *are* what we own.

Here, in these walls, we remember that what is most important about us is not what we own but *that we are owned*, a glorious possession, loved by God, who would supply all the most important of our needs and free us to live joyfully.

We come because in this sensate, physical world we need to know that there is mystery. That beyond what we can see or feel or touch there is One who stands behind all things in whom we live and move and have our being, who is ours and Whose we are, and from whose love nothing in life or in death can separate us.

That's why we come to church. Because of all the stars by which we navigate it is the surest, brightest, and best.

And I know that the church is imperfect, a flawed and sometimes faithless aggregate of people who as Christians do not live up to the name of the one by whom we are named.

Who is it who said that “What we seek is heaven, and what we get instead is the church.” But of course, if you know that the church is only an imperfect expression of fallible and human people you will not be surprised that the church’s record is at best spotty; every church’s record is so.

The church is like some radio operator in a B-movie set in World War II, trying to listen on headphones to a scratchy frequency where the signals are not always clear and the source is sending in Morse Code; but there we are, leaning over the table, scratching down the notes of what we think we hear, listening for every dot and dash as if life itself were at stake, which of course it is.

Paul was painfully aware of the church’s imperfection, and his own spotty background and imperfect discipleship. “We have this treasure in clay jars,” he said, in NRSV phrasing. But I like the old King James, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels.” Commonplace, as if it were clay thrown and turned and shaped and formed on a wheel of some country potter in West Virginia. Imperfect, but adequate, and fired in the kiln to make it durable and enduring. Not pretty, but serviceable.

That’s the church. A place where they welcome you at the door and take you in and sit you by the fire and warm you there with a hot brew and some good bread and the hearty stew of what you most need.

We have these treasures in earthen vessels, Paul said of the church and of the gospel hidden in those clay jars. And yes, it is not perfect, but it is what God has made of it, and we are the better for being a part of it, earthen vessels that we ourselves are.

A friend tells about the church he attends in the summer time. He is one of the most eloquent preachers in the English speaking world and he is asked to preach in the great pulpits and cathedrals and Gothic sanctuaries of the nation and of the world Sunday after Sunday.

But in the summertime, he and his wife settle into a Sunday congregation of just twenty or so people that meets in what he describes as the farthest point in a three point charge for the itinerant pastor of this little country Methodist church. One of the members opens the small one room chapel each Sunday, unlocks the door, puts out the bible, turns on the lights. When the service is ready to begin he takes one of those brass candle lighters and walks up the center aisle and lights the two candlesticks on the communion table, then walks again down the aisle to the back of the church, which is as much of a call to worship as the one the pastor reads.

The woman that plays the piano misses a few notes and has to start over now and then, her eyes aren’t what they once were, and her fingers not as nimble. The piano hasn’t been tuned in years. It doesn’t make much difference, though. She only knows three hymns anyway, and they sing those three every Sunday.

The pastor is a woman about fifty, she was ordained just a few years ago, and they are all still waiting for her to preach a good sermon. But the church comes alive when they get to the sharing of concerns before the prayers. “What should I include in the prayers today?” the pastor asks. She looks out at a woman who has been through a pretty rough divorce. A year or so ago her husband was arrested for beating her up and he’ll be in jail for several more years. She’s living on food stamps and sells produce at a roadside stand to keep her children going.

Another member sitting in the front over to the side asks the pastor to pray for her brother who is out of work now, and needs surgery to repair the vertebrae in his back. He doesn’t have any insurance so she’s taken him in.

And so it goes. The prayers are gathered up and offered with compassion by the pastor, who ends the prayer with an “Amen” and a call for the offering.

Down comes Elbert Dunleavy, with a wooden plate in his hand, and he gives it to his grandson who is sitting on the front row. The boy has cerebral palsy, so Elbert puts his arm around the boy and helps him collect the offering, steadying him as he lumbers and shakes down the aisle. Together they hobble back to the front of the church and Elbert puts his arms on the arms of his grandson and they lift the plate as high as they can so God can see it and then give it to the pastor for another blessing.

My friend and his wife say that there is no place, no church, no beautiful cathedral in all the world where the love of God is more manifest than in that summer chapel where they worship on the Eastern Shore.

On this Sunday of the annual meeting, this Sunday when we welcome new members and renew the life of the church, I hope that in spirit and in compassion for one another, we can be more and more, a church like that church where the burdens and cares of one another are shared by all, and so the joys as well. That’s the church at its best. Earthen vessel bearing a priceless treasure.

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¹ Acts 8:2

² Acts 9:1-2

³ Gal 3:1

⁴ *The New Colossus* by Emma Lazarus.

⁵ Barak Obama, Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009, Washington, D.C.