

Kirby Lawrence Hill

Abington Presbyterian Church

1 Samuel 3:1-10

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

June 3, 2018

## SOMETHING IN CLAY JARS

Christmastime is normally when we focus on how God's word became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. God's coming in human form is sometimes referred to as the incarnation. On Christmas Eve, we were singing, "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the incarnate deity, pleased in flesh with us to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel. Hark! The herald angels sing, 'Glory to the newborn king!'"<sup>1</sup> However, this day our focus is not God becoming human, but God continuing to work through those who are human. We heard the story of God in the night calling Samuel when he was a child, which led to a life-long service to heavenly purposes in shaping the people of Israel. We also heard the Apostle Paul describing the motivation and methodology for his ministry dedicated to proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. He writes about having a treasure in clay jars.

In that passage from 2 Corinthians, Paul refers to the first creation story in Genesis when he describes God creating light by saying, 'Let there be light.' Then he mentions the treasure in clay jars and may be thinking of the second creation story in Genesis when God scoops up some clay (which in Hebrew is 'adamah') and forms it into the shape of a human body and then breathes life into it and calls the person 'adam' or Adam. Very thin clay jars with holes cut out of them were used to hold candles or oil lamps in Paul's time. The clay jar kept the wind from blowing out of the flame, but was thin enough to allow the light to shine through. He uses that imagery in reference to the gospel light of God's love, burning within the clay human vessels. Imagine that – the same God who brought light to the universe at the beginning of time now wants to shine within and through us, even though we are fragile clay jars that have a variety of cracks and imperfections. Somehow, the Eternal can still be revealed through what is temporary; what is perfect can still illumine through that which is clearly imperfect. Such thoughts give hope that we can actually be used by God for God's purposes.

But we do best when we keep in mind what is the treasure part of this treasure in clay jars imagery. One of our members heard a story this week about a televangelist who was urging his followers to raise \$54 million dollars to purchase him a private jet so he could preach the gospel all over the world. The ministry already had three jets, but two were being used by other ministers and his current jet would not go as far on one tank of fuel as would the jet he wanted. The televangelist suggested that Jesus ministering in today's world would not be riding a donkey, as he did on Palm Sunday, but would be jetting around the world proclaiming the gospel, I guess in a luxury private jet. <sup>2</sup> The member who heard this story asked with a laugh if I would be making a similar request of the congregation.

Someone else this same week told me of a story shared by another televangelist about one his members, a businessman who wanted his own private plane, who was so focused on his goal that he purchased a model of the plane he wanted and placed it on his desk, in order for it to be a constant reminder before him. One day, one of the businessman's competitors came into his office, told the man he was retiring, and informed him that he would like to sell him his plane. It was a plane that was bigger and more expensive than what the first man had envisioned, so he told the person who had made the offer that he didn't have those kinds of funds. But the competitor told him that all he had to do was to take over his monthly payments and he could have the plane. The man who now had a nicer plane than he had envisioned was convinced that God had done more for him than he had even imagined. The point of the story of the televangelist was that, just like the man putting the model airplane on his desk, that we need to keep our vision in front of ourselves. <sup>3</sup>

I don't disagree with keeping our vision in front of ourselves, but I believe the treasure in clay jars imagery can help to shape the vision we want to pursue. Would Jesus be riding a donkey today? I don't know. But with a core value of his solidarity with the poor, I imagine Jesus would be traveling by foot or by bus or by bike instead of by luxury car or private jet. The treasure that has been placed within us is not something that can be bought or sold – it is the good news of how God's light and love illumine and transform our lives in ways that give us purpose that fuels our motivation and guides our methodology.

If a reminder of a central goal is a helpful way to remind one to pursue it, I do wish more Christians would put a picture on their desks or refrigerators of a lot of poor children being fed and housed and well-educated at safe schools, provided with good healthcare in the context of loving, whether they are citizens, refugees or immigrants instead of a luxury model jet that guided their pursuits. God has placed a treasure in clay jars, not exquisite china or fancy porcelain. We need to remember what is to be treasured and what is not.

A U.S. television reporter was filming a documentary on the work of the late Mother Teresa and her community of nuns in the slums of what is now called Kolkata, India. The reporter came upon a young American nun cleaning the running sores, filth and infections covering the body of a dying beggar. After filming the young woman as she carefully cleansed the ruined body of the man who was near death, the reporter looked down at the nun and declared, “Sister, I wouldn’t do that for a million dollars!” Without taking her eyes off her dying patient, the young nun quietly replied, “Neither would I.”<sup>4</sup>

We have been blessed with the treasure of news of God’s tremendous love for those who are sick and dying, for those who are hated and demeaned, for those who are in the grips of despair, as well as news of God’s tremendous love for those who are selfish and uncaring, for those who are successful by the world’s standards, for those who think they made it on their own. It is a treasure that can’t be stolen from us unless we devalue it in our own lives. So, we are free to, we are blessed to be able to, we are called to share that treasure of God’s love with all people. That motivates our focus as followers of Jesus and fills us with gratitude that we have such important things to do. That the treasure is entrusted to us who are clay jar kind of folks guides our methodology – one that calls for humility and a recognition of what has lasting value and what does not. Ostentation or a propensity to focus on our own desires over other people’s needs can detract from our ability to communicate the treasure of a message which has been entrusted to us.

That balance of a God-given treasure placed in clay jars enabled a truly impressive resiliency for the ministry of the Apostle Paul and his partners. Part of the passage is paraphrased with these words: “We’ve been surrounded and battered by troubles,

but we're not demoralized; we're not sure what to do, but we know that God knows what to do; we've been spiritually terrorized, but God hasn't left our side; we've been thrown down, but we haven't broken."<sup>5</sup> The proper motivation and methodology for our church's ministry will make us more resilient when we face a variety of challenges as well. And we can live lives of purpose and gratitude as we get to carry out the reason for which we have been called. Again, I know it's not Christmas, but with such great news, I'll tell you what comes to my mind: Joy to the World!

<sup>1</sup> Charles Wesley, *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*, second stanza, 1739.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/evangelist-wants-54m-jet-jesus-wouldnt-be-riding-donkey/2018/05/29/9326f286-6357-11e8-81ca-bb14593acaa6\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.6cb121b532a5](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/evangelist-wants-54m-jet-jesus-wouldnt-be-riding-donkey/2018/05/29/9326f286-6357-11e8-81ca-bb14593acaa6_story.html?utm_term=.6cb121b532a5)

<sup>3</sup> Joel Osteen, *You Can, You Will: 8 Undeniable Qualities of a Winner*, New York: Faith Words, 2014, pp. 12-14.

<sup>4</sup> Story shared in a book by Kevin Ryan, *Those Who Can, Teach*; Wadsworth Publishing, 2015, p. 24

<sup>5</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, NavPres, 2007.