

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

June 2, 2024 (Proper 4, Year B)
2 Corinthians 4:5-12

“We have this treasure in clay jars,” says St. Paul. We’ve heard this idea before. “It doesn’t matter what’s on the outside, but what’s on the inside,” we say. It’s familiar. But there may be a TWIST in the story. Don’t judge a book by its cover. Check this out:

(Watch Best friends become prom dates)

Rachel didn’t see what everyone ELSE saw on the OUTSIDE, Downs Syndrome; she ONLY saw what was on the INSIDE – her best friend.

It’s like a man I heard about whose wife was in a terrible accident that disfigured her face. She said to him, “How can you still love me when I look like this?” And he said, “All I see is the woman I fell in love with, the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with.”

Or it’s like the old man that still goes to see his wife in the nursing home every day, even when she can’t REMEMBER WHO he is. People say to him, “What difference does it make? She doesn’t even know who you are.” And he says, “But I still know who SHE is.”

You see, “It doesn’t matter what’s on the outside, but what’s on the inside.”

This is all true, but these words in scripture have something even MORE in mind. We KNOW this, because when St. Paul wrote them, he was writing to a CHURCH – a church that had gotten FAR too concerned with what was on the OUTSIDE instead of the TREASURE INSIDE. They had confused MINOR things with MAJOR matters, MAJORING in MINOR stuff to the NEGLECT of the MAJOR stuff. They were preoccupied with class distinctions, differences between Jews and Gentiles, arguments about circumcision, and right food, insiders and outsiders, even lawsuits –the ORDINARY, MUNDANE, USUAL stuff that makes for church quarrels. And Paul CALLS them out.

He says that we have the CONTAINER, and the STUFF CONTAINED – but WE have them CONFUSED! We think the clay POT is the REAL thing and we’ve NEGLECTED the IMPORTANT stuff INSIDE. And when we DO that, BEING the CRACKPOTS that we ARE, we think that WE are the treasure. We might even dare to think that the “extraordinary power” belongs to US. We might think that the CHURCH, the clay pot that HOLDS the treasure of the gospel, is the BIG DEAL. We might think we NEED \$1000 suits, and 10,000 seat stadiums, and 64 million dollar jets. Or we might take the FLIP side. We might think that all the SUPERFICIAL stuff, that so PREOCCUPIES us, and uses up all our energy, is MORE CRUCIAL than the stuff INSIDE the jar. We might! And then we would be like Corinth!

The treasure is the GOSPEL, the GOOD NEWS of God enacted in Jesus Christ, the one who reconciles us and liberates us to new life. The treasure is LOVE. The treasure is FORGIVENESS. The treasure is JUSTICE, GENEROSITY AND HOSPITALITY. It’s the old, old story of God’s self-giving grace, to US and to ALL God’s children. THAT is the TREASURE!

Everything ELSE is a clay pot that’s designed for the SOLE purpose of HOLDING and CARRYING that treasure. EVERYTHING else! It’s all clay pot...fragile, likely to break, never FULLY able to contain the RICHNESS of the treasure.

This is Paul’s message to the church, and I could spend COUNTLESS SERMONS on that subject. Walter Brueggemann wrote a GREAT one called “Getting Smashed for Jesus.”

But today, I want to bring us BACK to how this applies to our INDIVIDUAL lives. “We have this treasure in clay jars.” Even as INDIVIDUAL BELIEVERS, this STILL means MORE than JUST “what’s on the inside is more important than what’s on the outside.” It means MORE, because St. Paul says, “This extraordinary power belongs to GOD and DOES not come from us.” This TREASURE INSIDE

our clay pots, inside our BODIES, is MORE than having the BEST STUFF, or having the MOST power and influence, MORE than just being a good person, or being a best friend, or being a beloved wife or husband; it's MORE than just having a GOOD SOUL.

We KNOW this, because we have heard this text read at FUNERALS, when we've SEEN our loved ones afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down. Being ONLY a true friend, a beloved spouse, or a good soul isn't ENOUGH in THOSE times. It can ONLY lead

from afflicted to crushed,
from perplexed to despair,
from persecuted to forsaken,
from struck down to destroyed...

It's STILL confusing the CLAY POT with the TREASURE. "This extraordinary power belongs to GOD and DOES not come from US." The TREASURE is our FAITH.

And Paul says that the TREASURE PREVENTS us from taking the VESSELS TOO SERIOUSLY. It's the treasure of the GOSPEL, that IS the power of God, that does NOT fail. It's the TRUTH of the gospel that gives us the STRENGTH to BE,

afflicted but NOT crushed,
perplexed but NOT driven to despair,
persecuted but NOT forsaken,
struck down but NOT destroyed.

It's the treasure of our FAITH that lets us see clearly, and love dearly, and follow nearly. It's this "but NOT" that REALLY matters.

And so, we do not lose heart, because "this extraordinary power belongs to GOD and DOES NOT come from US."

We lose heart ONLY when we CONFUSE the clay pots, this STUFF, (gesture to sanctuary) this STUFF, for the TREASURE. But we do NOT lose heart...We do NOT LOSE HEART! Because the treasure ITSELF won't LET us. The TREASURE is GOD! Amen.