

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:5-12

⁵ For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’s sake. ⁶ For it is the God who said, “Light will 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 Christ.

⁷ 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. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed, ¹⁰ always carrying around in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. ¹¹ For we who are living are always being handed over to death for Jesus’s sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death is at work in us but life in you.

Graeme Keith, treasurer of the Billy Graham Association and Billy’s lifelong friend, was on an elevator with Billy Graham when another man recognized the evangelist. “You’re Billy Graham, aren’t you?” he asked.

“Yes,” Graham said.

“Well,” the man said, “you are truly a great man.”

“No, I’m not a great man. I just have a great message,” responded Graham.

I sense from Billy Graham’s response that this was a humbling moment for him. I’m sure it happened many times to him. He could have responded differently; perhaps pointing out his many accomplishments and his hard work. But Rev. Graham, knowing whose he was and knowing his mission, was not looking to stand in the spotlight. He wanted to point to the light, Jesus.

I imagine there were other encounters when Rev. Graham was challenged about his beliefs and his message. People not believing in God may have wanted to debate with him and try to prove him wrong. Certainly, people thought he was throwing his gifts away and could have used them for something more tangible to help society. He was not sheltered from the harassment of non-believers and the social pressures they used to challenge him. And, like everyone else, he faced temptations.

Like Rev. Graham, the apostle Paul faced a variety of opinions about him and the message he shared. Some people recognized him as a devoted man of Christ teachings. But others remembered him as a hardline Pharisee in the past, who down and made life miserable for the new believers in the faith. People didn’t trust him. Many feared him. They wanted him to prove he was a different man.

Others didn’t buy the message he shared about Jesus and kingdom living. Proving him wrong was their agenda, just like those who tried to prove Jesus to be wrong. Obstacles attacked from many sides, threatening to collapse his faithfulness to God’s call to be a light that pointed to Jesus. Pile on top of the personal attacks, the social temptations and priorities he bucked up against on a daily basis. One has to think that Paul had to get frustrated and tired of dealing with these hurdles and attacks. What kept him going? What can we learn for those moments when we feel like giving up?

First, Paul shows us that he embraces their criticism that there isn’t much to him. He didn’t find it necessary to build a case for himself to prove his worthiness and authority to preach the Gospel. He knew it wasn’t he that mattered, it was Jesus and the salvation he brought to humankind that really mattered.

Listen to the “Message” translation of the opening verses of today’s text: “Remember, our Message is not about ourselves; we’re proclaiming Jesus Christ, the Master. All we are is messengers, errand runners from Jesus for you. It started when God said, “Light up the darkness!” and our lives filled up with light as we saw and understood God in the face of Christ, all bright and beautiful.”

Paul, in saying this, is making a case that God, who at creation brought light into the darkness of the world, continues to be at work in the world through the new creation of the Christian gospel. This

time he sent light into human lives through Jesus Christ. Paul points to Jesus in these words and claims himself to be nothing more than a common clay pot.

Secondly, Paul’s confidence does not depend on the praise of the Corinthians or by external success. His worth depends on knowing the light of Christ who accepts Paul and dwells within Paul.

Something new happens in all of us who welcome the light of Jesus into our lives. No longer are our lives dependent on personal accomplishments and accolades. No longer is life all about ourselves, but it is about Jesus, His light shining through us. It’s about what he calls us to do and where he leads us to be. The more we seek Jesus and find him through the Word, prayer and his presence in our lives, the less we feel the need to prove to ourselves our own self-worth, and to others that we have value in our society. We stop doing things for attention and to earn love, because we know we are loved and valued greatly by God.

The lectionary Psalm for this week, Psalm 139, serves as a reminder of the intimacy we can have with God, if we welcome Him into our lives. It says in the first six verses of Psalm 139: “God, investigate my life; get all the facts firsthand. I’m an open book to you; even from a distance, you know what I’m thinking. You know when I leave and when I get back; I’m never out of your sight. You know everything I’m going to say before I start the first sentence. I look behind me and you’re there, then up ahead and you’re there, too—your reassuring presence, coming and going. This is too much, too wonderful—I can’t take it all in!”

Continuing, in verses 17-18, after the psalmist points how intimately we are known by God: “Your thoughts—how rare, how beautiful! God, I’ll never comprehend them! I couldn’t even begin to count them—any more than I could count the sand of the sea. Oh, let me rise in the morning and live always with you!”

Oh, that we should remember, every day, how valuable we are to God, how much we are loved by God even as we are known, sins and all. We would find freedom to be who God created us to be, instead of wearing heavy chains created by our own doing because of what we might feel we need to create ourselves to be. The freedom we would feel from the pressures to conform to a social mold, draws us even more into this precious relationship we can have with God.

Paul said, “I’m knocked down but not knocked out. I’m harassed but never abandoned. The exterior isn’t pretty but what’s inside this clay jar never abandons me. God is with us.” We’re not perfect. And we may not possess everything the world says we need, material wealth, good looks, educational degrees, professional power. We all have incurred some cracks as we battle the attacks against our being and our faith. But we have God, and the light he sent into the world through Jesus, shines through us.

We are clay pots that carry light to the world. In fact, we are a church of clay pots. The lost society may overlook us, except when they want to make a point to advance their cause and get what they want. Our ministries may be considered a useless cause, catering only to the users of society, delivering a message about someone who cannot be seen; or in their opinion, doesn’t seem to care. Yet, none of this matters—none of it—because each of us know Jesus and have his light shining in us, and through the unique gifts God gave us to use, we shine his light into the darkness of the world.

I am going to leave you with this story, which may sound familiar to some of you. A water bearer in India had two large pots, each hung on each end of a pole which he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, and while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream to the master’s house, the cracked pot arrived only half full.

For a full two years this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots full of water to his master’s house.

Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, perfect to the end for which it was made. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do.

After two years of what it perceived to be a bitter failure, it spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream. "I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you."

"Why?" asked the bearer. "What are you ashamed of?"

"I have been able, for these past two years, to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your master's house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work, and you don't get full value from your efforts," the pot said.

The water bearer felt sorry for the old, cracked pot, and in his compassion he said, "As we return to the master's house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path." Indeed, as they went up the hill, the old, cracked pot took notice of the sun warming the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path, and this cheered it some.

But at the end of the trail, it still felt bad because it had leaked out half its load, and so again it apologized to the bearer for its failure. The bearer said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of your path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walked back from the stream, you've watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table. Without you being just the way you are, he would not have this beauty to grace his house."

Each of us has our own unique flaws. Yet, we all have a purpose to fulfill. We are a church of clay pots, and we all have cracks. But if we will allow it, the Lord will use our flaws to grace His Father's table. Amen.