

June 3, 2018

Second Sunday After Pentecost

“A Joyful Jar of Clay”

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

I hate carrying around gasoline in my car. Not in the tank, but when I have to fill the jugs for the lawn mower or carry some small engine implement in the back of my Jeep. Even if it's 90 degrees out I'll still open the windows because the fumes give me a headache, make me nauseous and foul my mood. My wife Bridgette, on the other hand loves the smell of gasoline. She's weird.

What we carry around with us does have an effect on us. St. Paul describes Christians in general, and proclaimers of the Gospel in particular, as having “*this treasure in jars of clay*”. That treasure, of course, is the truth of the Gospel that because Jesus died and rose for us, we who live and believe in Him, yet though we die, shall live.

But Paul's metaphor struck me quite starkly because it's graduation time...or at least it was the last couple of weeks. I guess now graduation time is past and it is resume creation and distribution time! Resumes: trying to list every positive accomplishment you've achieved in your life and shine up the mediocre ones as much as possible. Listing every plus you possibly can and inflating your skill set in order to present yourself as the most valuable employee in the world to prospective employers. If you're metaphorically a jar, your resume is painting you as silver or gold, maybe tough as iron or dependable as stainless steel. Never as fragile and unattractive as clay.

It strikes me that we live in a culture where the jar we portray often is the priority over what is inside. Maybe it has always been this way and has just been enhanced a bit by the advent of social media. A person takes a million pictures trying to get the perfect selfie to post online so people don't see their flaws. A person virtue signals about causes and events far removed from them just so folks will think they care. One that makes my eyes roll bigtime comes from Christians—when they put up an “I love Jesus” post of some sort and then challenge other Christians to forward it, so folks see they're righteous and holy for what they've done and you're pagan scum if you don't follow suit.

The common thread is the concern that people see you not as clay, but as gleaming crystal, a good person, or beautiful person, or successful person or a person who has it all together.

Meanwhile, what's inside? I'm not claiming I know, but if there is so much concern about how others perceive one's self, I'm guessing that on the inside there is insecurity, anxiety, worry. I know from both experience and Holy Scripture that inside there's likely all sort of sinfulness: greeds, lusts, jealousies, covetousness and envy. In the end I think it boils down to the fallen nature simply carrying self around inside, which evidences itself in self-centeredness, often to the exclusion of God and neighbor.

If that's what you're carrying around inside, eventually it's going to make you sick, ruin your attitude; ultimately cost you true life. You are a jar of clay. Earthly life and earthly self gets cracks, sometimes is shattered by strife or calamity. If all you have is self, self-concern for you and yours, where are you left when you aren't up to the task, when self fails you as it ultimately must when self dies?

St. Paul writes, “*For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,'*”

*has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*”—the treasure in the jars of clay. His is writing to the Christians at Corinth, in the midst of a culture much like ours obsessed with self and self-promotion. But his example is to proclaim only Christ and seek no glory for himself at all. He confesses to being a jar of clay, a person of no value, a person being afflicted, persecuted and abused, and yet he cannot be driven to despair or defeated.

Why? Because believers are *“always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.”*

What is in his jar? The death of Jesus! The life of Jesus!

This is a game changer! First of all, if Jesus and His Gospel treasure is what’s in your jar of clay, does it matter that your jar—your body and life—are clay, chipped, cracking and passing away? No! You know the treasure of Christ will see you through this body and life to the treasures in heaven. This is why Paul and the other apostles, why multitudes of Christians through the centuries, have faced hardships, persecutions, even torture and death in joy and hope. Let the world do what it may to the feeble jar; the treasure therein endures to eternity.

Furthermore, what value is placed on the jar? Not a lot people. We’ve grown up in the United States, a country founded on Judeo-Christian values where for decades those values and the values of the culture got along pretty well. But people, the culture is taking a different fork in the road now, and we seem to think our Christian life can still stroll right along side with it. But the culture values the jar. We have the treasure!

This obsession with self-promotion, self-aggrandizement and self-gratification is not our calling. *“For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.”* Our aim is not to glorify the jar—the us that the world sees—any more than it is to serve ourselves as if we’re the treasure. The treasure is the Gospel of Christ. Our joy should be in proclaiming Him to the world, by our lips if that’s what we’re called to do, yes, but by our life that the world sees no matter what our calling!

The question is not “What perception do people have of me?” The question we care about is “When people see me, do they see Christ and His love reflected through me?”

Now I am by no means saying we’ve got to give up our ambitions, stop bathing and grooming, and walk around in sackcloth and ashes humility to show we aren’t worldly. A good resume leading to a great job isn’t a sin.

But a faithful Christ follower, loving and trusting Jesus and seeking to reflect His love in caring for neighbor by living out one’s Christian vocations honestly with zeal and vigor toward their boss, their spouse and family, toward the whole world around them—I’m pretty sure this will result in folks regarding you as a pretty decent person; a pretty decent Christian person.

But if your jar is full of yourself, you’re pretty much just loving yourself. And no matter how nice you paint the clay or how good it looks to the world, God knows who you’re loving. His promise is to a thousand generations of those who love Him, not who love themselves.

So don’t be afraid of being a jar of clay. In fact, rejoice in being Christ’s jar of clay, in that the treasure of the Gospel you hold is priceless and without end. Value and love and serve the treasure of Jesus that you carry. With him the world may chip, crack, scrape and even shatter you, but you cannot be destroyed. Death had its way with Jesus and yet He lives.

Live joyfully as His jar, His temple, His vessel, and His life is forever at work in you.

Amen.