

Blessings Flow from Cracked Pots

2 Corinthians 4:6-10
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
February 21, 2010

The cover of last week's edition of *Time* magazine announced, "The Science of Living Longer." It features a special 22-page Health Section and contains many fascinating articles on this subject. One of them begins somewhat startlingly:

You never get over the moment you realize that you're definitely going to die. You're usually a small child when the insight hits, and you usually have a vague idea of what death is, but the first-person epiphany – the "Wait, that's going to happen to *me*?" experience – changes everything. Your sense of time and its fleeting passage can never go back to what it was before you discovered that you too are on the clock.

Though perhaps the juxtaposition is coincidental, **the notion of reminding ourselves that we too are on the clock is a major point behind the age-old tradition of having ashes smudged on our forehead on Ash Wednesday**, complete with the words from Genesis, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." The ashes we used last Wednesday are here at the front of the sanctuary, and will remain so throughout this 40-day season of Lent.

Though it's something most of us don't like to dwell on, it is true that the human body (though remarkable) is indeed fragile. That reality is nothing new, of course. In fact, it's a theme that runs throughout the letters that the Apostle Paul wrote to the congregations that he founded. In one such reference, found in **2 Corinthians 4:7, Paul writes, "We have this treasure in clay jars..."**

The treasure he refers to is the covenant relationship between God and humankind – the gospel, the good news, the "light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Cor. 4:6) In a beautifully expressive metaphor, Paul writes that this treasure is found in clay jars – in us. **The light of the gospel, therefore, has been placed within the minds and hearts of its human bearers as a treasure placed within jars of clay**, or earthen vessels. And as we all know, clay can be a fragile substance.

Paul goes on to present a long list of afflictions and hardships that he and all people face in life. Paul wants his readers to be aware that even though we are people entrusted with a treasure within, **this does not change the conditions and circumstances of our lives**. Instead, this treasure within leads to a **change in attitude and fortitude that enables Paul, and us, to bear the suffering and hardships of life**.

This also provides Paul, as it should us, with the confidence to carry on; confidence to prevent him and us from being overcome with the despair that is often part of the cost of ministry.

He reflects on this later in this chapter when he goes on to state, "So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being

renewed day by day... for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." I often read that passage at memorial services.

Last Sunday, I preached on a passage from the Old Testament prophet **Jeremiah** who used metaphorical language to suggest that **God is like a potter, and we are like clay in the hands of God** in that we can be shaped, molded, formed and re-formed to God's purposes for us as the people of God.

Paul goes a different direction with his metaphor of **what happens after the clay is fired** and becomes a useful, though fragile, piece of pottery. Those of us in the Progressive Christianity adult church school class recently watched an interesting demonstration of one artist's unique glazing and firing techniques in a video segment that was presented at the close of one of the lessons of our 21-week curriculum. Unlike typical glazing and firing techniques, his is one that uses extreme and fast-rising temperatures that causes a lot of internal stress on the clay pot. He admits that he doesn't have a lot of control in what the final product will look like until it undergoes an intense transformation. The result is a unique and unpredictable iridescent coloring of each pot.

We reflected upon that demonstration as a metaphor of what often happens to a lot of us. It is often only through intense internal stress, with an element of intentionality, that we are transformed into a work of art and beauty as individuals, or perhaps even as a congregation. And though we allow ourselves to enter into this transformation, there is often not a lot of control during the process.

Another way to look at all of this is that if we truly want to experience positive change in our lives, then sometimes the only way to get there is through an often uncomfortable period of transformation – a 'firing' if you will.

That may even be one of the main points of today's gospel reading of the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. For he emerges from that experience strengthened, perhaps we could even use the word hardened, for the work of ministry that lies ahead.

Getting back to the treasure in clay jars metaphor, **there may be times in most of our lives when we do not feel that we are a work of art or beauty – that there are too many flaws and imperfections in the clay of our being that keep us from fulfilling the purpose for which we are formed and created.** Given that tendency, I want to close with a story that some of you have heard before. Its origin is unknown. Some attribute it to an old tale from India, some from China. Nonetheless, this is the Tale of the Cracked Pot.

The Tale of the Cracked Pot

A water bearer had two large pots, each hanging off the opposite end of a pole that 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.

Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments. 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 full 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 water bearer. "What are you ashamed of?"

The pot said, "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 water bearer felt sorry for the 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 cracked pot took notice of the beautiful 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 water bearer for its failure.

The bearer said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I worked with it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you've watered them. For 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 and in our own way we are all cracked pots.

We all know we have imperfections, and to varying degrees we sometimes feel ashamed of them. But what we need to remember is that **even with, and perhaps even because of all our imperfections we create a lot of beauty and a lot of good in the world.** Perhaps what real courage is all about is not letting our fears and imperfections stop us.

For indeed each one of us is a treasure in a clay jar. And even when we find ourselves to be imperfect and a bit cracked, **we can still be an instrument through which the love, grace and blessings of God pour out.**

Amen.