**Cracked Pots for Christ**

**Text: 2 Corinthians 4:7**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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Years ago, back in the 1980’s, I drove a beat-up old Toyota. Tiny little car, rusting body, stick shift; but I’ll tell you, in the midst of a Canadian winter, that car could go anywhere. Fancy cars with their wide tires would be stuck in the snow, but I’d just put my little Toyota in 2nd gear and away I’d go! I had a neighbor with the same car. This guy was from Eastern Europe. One day I stood beside my beat-up Toyota while I watched him drive his beat-up Toyota through a snow drift and into his driveway. When he got out of the car I shouted, “Great car, eh?” And he said, “Stronger than a Russian tank!”

Appearances can be deceiving. Sometimes a dynamic force can be found in an unassuming package. Like my beat-up old Toyota. And the Apostle Paul. He’s often depicted as a small, bald-headed, unattractive man, and scripture supports this depiction. Furthermore, he suggests that he’s not the greatest preacher and he doesn’t perform miracles, and this apparently made him an easy target for preachers and teachers and healers who were perhaps Adonis-like in their appearance as they took over churches that Paul established.

Paul, of course, was a missionary. He’d come to a place where the Gospel hadn’t been proclaimed, and he’d start to preach, he’d start to teach, he’d start-up a congregation, and after things seemed to be going well, he’d entrust that church to local leadership, move on to another city and repeat the process. But sometimes, after Paul left, these preachers and teachers and healers would come along who seemed so much more impressive than Paul. They’d take over these churches and tell the new Christians how weak and misguided Paul was, how he wasn’t a true apostle, how *they* were the ones who *really* had the power of the Risen Christ.

This is what happened in Corinth. And Paul’s letters to the Corinthians attest to the challenges of this troubled congregation. We know of two letters, but some scholars think they’ve found fragments of other letters edited into the final form of these two. There might’ve been at least four letters to the Corinthians. This challenging congregation kept Paul busy!

But as we’ve said, appearances can be deceiving. A fancy package might contain little of substance, and a small, modest box might hold a diamond ring. Paul says that he and his close associates are like clay jars. Nothing fancy. Just the conventional earthenware that was used in the 1st century for shipping or storing or drinking liquids. But within these common clay pots – to use another translation – within these everyday clay jars, there was an immeasurable treasure. And that treasure was the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in Jesus Christ.

“I may not be the most eloquent speaker,” Paul says, “and I don’t have the gift of healing, and I’m hardly eye candy, but God has placed within me the extraordinary power of the Risen Christ. And I’m not bragging,” Paul goes on. “This is no credit to me. I’m not calling attention to myself. Look at me,” Paul says. “Is this a face that anyone would brag about? No! The power within me is a gift from God. It is a treasure that is contained in this very ordinary package.”

Paul is making at least 3 points here, and the first point is this: It’s not about me, it’s about Jesus. Those other preachers can strut or preen as much as they please, they can act as if they’ve already reached some glorified state where they can bask in the glow of their prowess and virtue and success, but we’re just going to preach the Gospel; we’re just going to serve the Lord. And the going may be tough and the results not always impressive and that might be discouraging but hey: it’s not about me. It’s not about us. It’s about the extraordinary power of Jesus Christ at work in our midst. It’s not about praising or preserving what we’ve got; it’s about heading for the future glory of the Kingdom.

I’m sometimes amazed and, I have to confess, a little jealous, about the way in which new churches sometimes take off. They grow quite quickly and they develop all sorts of creative and fruitful ministries. But one reason for their success is that they’re not spending a lot of time and energy trying to preserve old programs and traditions and ministries that have run their course. They’re not trying to preserve the clay jar; they’re not trying to preserve the old shell. They’re focused on the inner dynamic of Jesus Christ, they’re focused on proclaiming Jesus Christ, they’re focused on being the Christ in the community as they reach out to the broken and suffering people around them, to the despairing souls who are struggling to make ends meet and have just about given up; to the hungry souls who are starving spiritually and need to be fed by the Holy Spirit through word and music and fellowship and prayer. They’re not focused on growing the church per se, they’re focused on the mission of Jesus Christ. And the irony is that when you’re focused outward on mission, one of the results is…growing the church. I mean, if you offer food to hungry beggars – whether it’s spiritual food or real, good tasting, physical food – if you offer food to folks who are starving either spiritually or physically or both, they’re going to come back for more. They’re going to want to be a part of you. Especially if you invite them and welcome them. But the focus needs to be outward, not inward. The focus needs to be sharing the extraordinary power of Jesus Christ, not program preservation or institutional survival. Paul says, “We are being given-up to death for Jesus’ sake.” Paul says, “We’re willing to die if that will bring new life to you.” And a congregation that says the same thing – a congregation that’s not about preserving itself but is rather about sharing the life of Christ with others – such a congregation is following the apostolic teaching of Paul as passed down to him by Jesus himself.

It’s not about us, it’s not about self-preservation; it’s about Jesus. That’s Paul’s first point. And if it’s about Jesus, then it’s about serving the Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed. That’s the second point. Jesus was all about the Kingdom. Jesus said next to nothing about building-up the Church. And what he did say was probably put into his mouth by the early Church itself. “You are Peter,” Jesus says in Matthew 16:18, “and on this rock I will build my church.” That’s almost definitely Matthew talking, not Jesus. The Lord wasn’t thinking about maintaining some institution called the Church, he was too busy trying to work with these 12 frustrating disciples that he’d called to his side. Talk about common clay pots! Talk about nothing to write home about! Yet Jesus took what he had in human resources, and used the amazing power that God had placed within him and within them, and bit by bit the Kingdom of God began to advance.

It’s not about us; it’s about serving the Kingdom. And exactly how we’re going to do that will become clear in our Future Story. But we already have some hints.

For example: our new program of musical outreach in the community – at least, we’ll have such a new ministry if you all approve the proposed budget later this morning – our new musical outreach ministry, under Christa’s direction, will draw children and youth into this place; children and youth who have musical gifts but limited opportunities to develop those gifts. They’ll be touched by Jesus through the ministry of music. And our community will be touched by Jesus through a First Christian Church Community Chorus. That’s the vision. And who knows? Maybe some folks in the community who are fed by the music will come and check out the place where the food is being served. And we will be serving the Kingdom in this community.

Here’s another example: There are folks in this town who have been driven to despair by underemployment and poverty. Yet they have all sorts of gifts that could propel them toward prosperity. The trouble is, no one has ever told them that they have such gifts. No one has ever come alongside them and helped them develop those gifts. But we are a church that knows how to nurture people, how to encourage people, how to surround folks with love and prayers when they’re going through a tough time. Surely we can come alongside some of our struggling neighbors and encourage them on their way as they find the training and the employment that they need; pointing them toward any number of employers who are *desperate* for folks who are willing to be trained and to work hard. That’s another vision. And if we choose to pursue it, we will be serving the Kingdom in this community.

Or how about this: there are folks in this community who are so discouraged and so broken – so afflicted and perplexed and struck down, to use Paul’s language – that they just need a place where they’ll be safe; where they’ll be cared for. Maybe they’ve destroyed their bodies through addiction or their spirits have been crushed through trauma; maybe they’re veterans who’ve never recovered from the horrors that they experienced on the battlefield. In many cases it’s all of these and more. So some of the pastors and one of the social service agencies in town are talking about providing shelter for these folks and just keeping some of God’s children safe; not only during the winter but year round. If we choose to become involved in that ministry, we will be serving the Kingdom in this community.

Those are just 3 examples of the future ministries to which God may be calling us. There are many more. And it’s tempting to think: Oh, we can’t do that. We’re such a small, struggling church. And we’re already stretched to our limit.” Well, yeah. I hear that. What we’re really saying is, “Were just fragile clay jars. If we’re not careful, we’re going to break.” And yes, that’s exactly Paul’s third point. We *are* fragile clay jars. The *Church* is a fragile clay jar. And if we put ourselves under enough pressure we *will* break. That’s why we have to let some things go. We can’t both preserve what already is, and serve the Kingdom that is coming into being. We can’t continue to do things that perhaps were cutting edge Kingdom things 30 or 40 or 40 years ago but are no longer, *and* be on the front lines of the Kingdom today. If we try, we *are* going to break. And that won’t do ourselves or the Kingdom any good. So part of the crafting of the Future Story will be discerning where we’re going to be in five years, *and* what we’re going to let go of in order to get there. As much as I love Paul’s image of the Church as an earthen vessel, I also like the image of the Church as a middle infielder: on the balls of your feet and ready to handle whatever ground ball or line drive the world may send you. You can’t do that if you have a ball and chain attached to your ankle. So we have to let go of those things that are weighing us down: whether it’s old ministries or anger or pain or prejudice or petty disputes that have lingered between members or families for years or generations.

“We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs God and does not come from us.” And of course Paul’s first and last point – not only in this passage but always – is that God *has* given us an amazing power that can do far more than anything that we might ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20). That power may not turn us into a mega church. That power may not even bring us back to the kind of numbers that filled this Sanctuary 50 years ago. But the extraordinary power of the Risen Christ will, at the very least, make us a tough, gritty church that will serve the Kingdom by serving this community. And sometimes it’s those tough, gritty, albeit small churches that have the staying power. Robert Schuler’s much celebrated Crystal Cathedral is no more. But I can tell you about some other churches out on the West Coast, and elsewhere in this great nation, gritty, little churches that continue to proclaim the Word and serve the Kingdom. Because they know that it’s not about them. They know that they’re just common clay pots. They know that it’s really about Jesus; they know it’s really about the Kingdom; they know that all that’s common and earthy will fade away, but the Kingdom and the power and the glory of God will abide forever. It is not death, but life, that is at work in this church and this community, the eternal life of Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord. Amen.