

Text: II Corinthians 4: 5-12  
Title: Common, Cracked, and Called  
Date: 06.03.18  
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With a lifetime of church potlucks under my belt I'm a connoisseur of seven-layer salad. As I understand it you start with lettuce and add subsequent layers of tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, sweet peas, hard boiled eggs, and sharp cheddar cheese ~ all topped off with bacon. Seven layers built atop one another with a little mayonnaise mixed in as mortar. Delicious....

When I was in Israel I saw where people built on top of previous villages, cultures, or civilizations. Layer after layer buried and built up again. In fact, a "tel" is a mound formed from the accumulated refuse of people living on the same site for hundreds or thousands of years. Therefore, archeologists dig their way through the layers to uncover and discover the history of a place and a people.

One of the most common ways to determine the date or identity of a certain layer is the kind of pottery that's uncovered. With each age, with each culture, with each new people there's often a different form, style, or quality to the pottery that's unearthed. And, it's common. Every culture makes and uses pottery for all sorts of purposes.

Which leads to this layer....

Archeologists have uncovered in the Greco-Roman world, and in Palestine, "coin hoards" that are dated to the first century. They've discovered coins buried in clay jars for safe keeping. They've discovered jars holding a few coins and jars holding thousands of coins. Historians/archeologists believe that people often buried these clay pots in times of warfare or instability. Common clay pots were used to hide buried treasure.

And, that practice was so common that Jesus told a parable about a man who found such a hoard and proceeded to sell all of his possessions that he might buy the field where the pot was buried. The Greek word for "treasure" used by Jesus is the same word that Paul uses in our text this morning:

*we have this treasure in jars of clay....*

That's a remarkable image.

The wealthy used ivory, brass, marble, and fine wood for their needs, but the poor used clay. The commoners used common earth to form water pitchers, oil jars, mixing bowls, washbasins, containers for salads for potlucks, and places to hold great treasure.

Which is to say that God uses run-of-the-mill humanity. God chooses every-day-utilitarian-clay-pots that are dented, scratched, flawed, and fragile to hold treasure. Johanna Adams puts it this way:

*This is not bad news, it is simply the truth, and only the truth will allow us to be free and human in the way God intended. Here is the truth: from dust we came, to dust we will*

*return, and for the time that we are on this earth, what we are is somewhat analogous to a piece of pottery. Useful to be sure, but also subject to chipping and cracking and likely to contain imperfections.*

Dear friends, you are those jars of clay.  
You are those who hold the great treasure of God.  
In our bodies we carry around this treasure.  
God doesn't choose seraphim or cherubim he chooses humanity.  
God doesn't choose the really religious or the super spiritual he chooses us.  
That's a remarkable claim.

One of my current favorite songs is by lovelytheband. (Not, the band called, "lovely." But, lovelytheband. All one word.) The opening line of the song that hooked me is as follows:

*I like that you're broke,  
you're broke you're like me,  
maybe that makes me a fool.*

As God chooses us to bear treasure he has chosen that which is broke.  
There are no qualifiers. Pots are young and old, male and female, gay and straight, liberal and conservative, rational and touchy-feely, disabled, and every color and stripe of humanity. And yet, all are broke, like you and like me. I don't know any clay jars that aren't broken in some way. Still the claim is that we carry treasure.

Therefore, by the way, let us not be quick to judge or demean another pot ~ they carry treasure.  
Who are we to deny the Spirit of God that dwells within the other?  
Who are we to dismiss the treasure in another pot?  
Amen?

So, what's the treasure?

What is it that we carry around in our bodies? When Paul writes, "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us." What is the treasure?

Our text reads that the same God who spoke light out of darkness "made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ."  
That's quite a string of religious words, but it is to say that:

The treasure is the light of God in Christ.  
The treasure is the knowledge of God in Christ.  
The treasure is the glory of God in Christ.

And again, as that is true, that's remarkable.

The very same power that at the beginning of time created light is now illumined in you.  
The very same Word that from the beginning was God and was with God is now in you.  
The very same glory ~ God emptied in Jesus of Nazareth even unto death ~ has taken up residence in in you.

Alongside worrying about your kids, fretting over a coming constitutional crisis, thinking about how best to juggle scheduling demands, wondering if your money will make it through retirement, enjoying friends, grieving loss, feeling and fretting and.... And, in the midst of all of that there also resides the presence and power of God in Christ ~ in you.

My father was murdered when he was fifty. He was in the prime of his career. He was looking forward to a sabbatical in Toronto. He and my mother had already picked out an apartment. They were about to write a new chapter in their love story....

My mother was shattered by his loss. Every space in her heart and mind was overwhelmed by shock and grief and loneliness. She knew the cliché that “God never gives us more than we can handle” was a lie.

She wasn't much for god-talk. Language about “what the Lord was doing” didn't come easily to her lips. And yet, years later, when asked about her faith through this loss, my mother said that there was something that undergirded her,

something that sustained her,  
something enabled her to keep going.

Paul puts it this way (paraphrased by J.B. Phillips):

*This priceless treasure we hold, so to speak, in a common earthenware jar—to show that the splendid power of it belongs to God and not to us. We are handicapped on all sides, but we are never frustrated; we are puzzled, but never in despair. We are persecuted, but we never have to stand it alone: we may be knocked down but we are never knocked out! Every day we experience something of the death of the Lord Jesus, so that we may also know the power of the life of Jesus in these bodies of ours.*

Is that a fair reading?

Does the light, or knowledge, or glory of God in Christ sustain us when these clay jars are shattered and broken almost beyond repair?

Dear friends, it seems to me that we will all know adversity. In one way or another we will all be pressed, crushed, perplexed, and struck down. Live long enough and you will suffer. But,....

But, in the midst of that God has called common cracked clay jars to hold the treasure of God in Christ. God doesn't pull us out of this vale of tears but God enters in ~

even unto death,  
even into our vulnerable broken bodies....

And therefore,  
even in our weakness,  
even in our flaws and failures,  
even in our death,  
the light of God in Christ still shines through....

I hope that doesn't seem like privileged-pious-claptrap. I think the healthiest communities are those rooted in the conviction that we are all chipped, cracked, and crumbly. And yet God in Christ still takes up residence in and among us.

In that spirit we ordain and install new Elders and Deacons and send on an intergenerational team of Hope folks to serve the migrant worker and homeless community in Austin, Texas.  
Each one: common, cracked, and called.  
All of us: common, cracked, and called.

Thanks be to God.  
Amen.