

Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 3, 2018

Text: 2 Corinthians 4:5-12

Theme: "Worn Out?"

In our text for today Paul speaks of jars of clay. I have a little clay here, left over from my man last week. Let me give you a little correction from last week. I said I dug this dirt from just south of our building, well, actually, it was from east of the playground. It stays wet over there and is easy to dig. But no, I didn't attempt to make a clay jar. I don't think it's good pottery making grade. Jars of clay would be common jars, maybe even fragile. It reminds that the true value is not in the jar but in the treasure. Who were these jars of clay? "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother." (2 Corinthians 1:1) They were jars of clay entrusted with the treasure of the Gospel.

Clay jars were very common. The majority of containers, especially for liquids, probably were made of clay. This clay could be for noble use, like the best wine of the banquet, or lowly use, like the clay of the chamber pot. What would our equivalent be? It could be paper, or plastic, or Styrofoam, or ceramic or glass.

Clay jars were not bad, but they certainly were not gold or even silver. Silver containers could be highly honored for the highly honorable. Paul would not boast of himself in such a manner. Clay was just fine for a good use in good form. Clay can be a little worn after a while, but his ultimate concern was not for his own clay vessel, but for passing on the treasure with which he was entrusted.

So what's Paul's clay story here in 2 Corinthians? What's the background? If you want to go all the way to the first vessel reference and Paul we can go back to his

conversion. Remember how he was knocked off his horse on the way to Damascus at the bright light and at the voice, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4) He was led to Damascus having been blinded. After three days he would meet a man named Ananias, a man reluctant for such a meeting as Saul’s reputation has preceded him. But God told him, “Go, for he is chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.” (same word translated “jar” is translated “instrument” here, *skeuos*).

And he certainly was. He was a man on a mission who never got over the fact that God had turned him a blasphemer and a persecutor into an apostle of the One whom he was persecuting. Paul writes 2 Corinthians on his third missionary journey. He’s been at this apostle business for a while. Paul had established the church at Corinth on second missionary journey. He had devoted a big chunk of time at Corinth (Acts 18). There were many converts at Corinth, but the church at Corinth was a bit of a problem child. There was those at Corinth involved in adultery, holding on to pagan ways, and spiritualizing the resurrection. Did it have something to do with the relatively close proximity to the center of Greek thought, Athens, as compared to other churches?

Sometime while Paul was in Ephesus on his third missionary journey, a place where he also spent a big chunk of time, so the word gets to him of issues in Corinth and he responds with the words of 1 Corinthians. Then later comes this letter. It was probably written from one of the Macedonians cities after Paul had left Ephesus. We know from Acts 20 Paul made his way down through Macedonia to Corinth where he stayed for three months. Then he went back up through Macedonia. Did he write this letter before he made that trip to Corinth or on his return from Corinth? I think it was on the return. I base this on 2 Corinthians 2:1, “For I made up my mind not to cause you another painful

visit.” I can envision some pain being involved in that three month stay as he addressed the situations he had written of in 1 Corinthians. I don’t think he would have referred to his first visit as a “painful” one, and if it was not that trip of Acts 20 then there has to have been another excursion to Corinth we do not know of otherwise.

Paul was an apostle, a preacher and teacher of the Gospel directly commissioned by Jesus Christ Himself. This chosen vessel of Paul can be represented by this mug, a teacher appreciation mug. Paul was certainly a teacher and he did know some appreciation especially in the churches in Macedonia, Philippi and Thessalonica in particular. Paul writes this letter as part of his stewardship of the treasure.

What’s your story? How is it with your clay? Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are all chosen, those called out of the darkness into God’s light to proclaim God’s wonders. Every believer is a vessel of clay who knows the treasure. The clay reminds us the focus is not on the vessel but the treasure. We have the answer to give for those who ask, the treasure of the hope that is in us, the hope of life forever and life now. We, vessels of clay, are in the ongoing transformation of the Spirit. There are those who are entrusted with the preaching and the teaching of the treasure, those who hold the office of pastor. There are other offices we construct to assist in this work. Such would be teachers at CCA, those called, and those not called but dedicated to, even consumed with the welfare of the children. The passion is for the children to learn not only academics, but even more so the love of God in Christ. We, believers, are God’s vessels, all vessels of clay.

Vessels do wear. Paul certainly knew so. He recounts some of his wearing experiences in chapters 6 and 11 of 2 Corinthians. He endured a lot of wear in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea on his second trip. Life can be quite wearing as we are faithful to the Lord, actually the reaction against faithfulness can be quite wearing. Paul says, “we

always carry around in the death of Christ in the body (vs 10).” This is likely a reference to dying to self and living for Christ. It is taking up our cross and following after Jesus. Faithfulness comes with a price. Acts of light can be met with deeds of darkness from those outside the church and those within. There’s just no way around it.

Yes, it can be wearing. Now I had in mind the perfect cup to make this point. It belonged to my late father-in-law. He had had it for a long time. It was chipped, and stained and even cracked from top to bottom. But it still held coffee and he still used it. Yes, it was perfect especially since his name was Paul. But, alas, that one I do not have, but this one we do. Yes, teacher appreciation, but when I turn it around you can see some chips and some scratches, battle scars. We look again at verses 8 and 9. Paul speaks of his experience, being afflicted...perplexed...persecuted...and struck down. Such wear happens. It is as Paul told new believers at the end of his first missionary journey, “It is through much tribulation that we must enter the kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:22)

Wear will happen, but worn out? Paul may have been a little discouraged as he writes 2 Corinthians. He wasn’t feeling the love from all. “We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also.” (6:11-13) There appear to be some in Corinth who are not too fond of Paul, certainly more fond of others. Some were saying of Paul, “His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, his speech is of no account.” (2 Corinthians 10:10) Were there some silver tongued orators among them whom considered themselves silver cups? Paul writes in chapter 11, “Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to those super-apostles. Even though I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge.” (11:5, 6) Who were these super-apostles? Evidently there was a faction in Corinth that had not been

persuaded by Paul's letter or his presence. Probably no one called himself by that title. There were some in Corinth who would say, "If only Apollos were here, now that man could really preach." Maybe there were others who looked to Peter. "We need him to come visit us. We could get the real story from him; after all, he walked with Jesus."

Super-apostle is probably a term coined by Paul to grab the attention of his hearers. Actually, super apostle may be too weak of a translation. The modifier on apostle is actually a compound of two, *hyper*, *over*, and *lian*, very or exceedingly. We could translate it "Super-Duper-apostle."

The opposition was probably wearing on Paul, bearing the cross is wearing. Will we be worn out? What if Paul had written, "We are afflicted, even crushed, perplexed to the point of despair, persecuted and ultimately forsaken, struck down again and again and again and until we are destroyed."

But that's not what he writes. It's all wearing, and he's probably a bit worn, but not worn out. He probably feels a little unappreciated, but his ultimate concern is for the conveying of the treasure, not the vessel that is bringing it. We read in chapter 11, "But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus other than the one we proclaimed...you put up with it readily enough." (2-5). Look at the treasure. "For the 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." (vs 6) Look at Jesus and see the glory of God, not the glory of His pure holiness and power unmasked, but the glory of obedience and service, glory not in a way to judge and destroy, but to save. Here is the glory of being His being lifted up for us, the Father's will and plan from the beginning. His is the glory of perfect righteousness. Now that Jesus has

been raised up, has ascended and is reigning. He is returning with the last trumpet call. Paul writes later in chapter 4, “knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into His presence.” (vs 14)

Our focus is put in the right spot, on the treasure. It is not about Paul, not about Apollos, not about Peter, not about the pastor, not about the teacher. It is about Jesus. “Who then is Apollos? Who is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each.” (1 Corinthians 3:5). Paul writes, “We who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.” (vs 11, 12) There is life because others are being pointed not to our weak clay, but to the treasure of Jesus. When that happens Pauls and Peters, and Apollos, and pastors and teachers are greatly encouraged.

Faithful service is wearing. Praise God for a Sabbath Day’s rest. Jesus tells us that man was not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath for man (Mark 2:27). We are renewed, even refilled as we gather around the treasure and take in the treasure. Actually the silver we used for the cup can remind us of the far more valuable treasure inside, the body and blood of Jesus for our forgiveness. We are strengthened, equipped to serve.

Wearing even worn, but not worn out. Paul kept after it, kept after it until the day his clay was laid aside waiting for the day of resurrection. Because he was faithful unto death many more have been counted among the faithful. One day you can thank him when you see him before the throne. You may be surprised when someone thanks you for what you may have thought was a fruitless effort at the time. We do have the treasure that transforms our lifeless clay to bring the message of life to more. For Jesus’ sake.

Amen