



“Jars of Clay”
Scripture – 2 Corinthians 4:5-12
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, August 4, 2019

On the morning of their father’s funeral, Barbara Lundblad and her sister set off on a mission. They drove several miles south of town to the farm where they had grown up. Their parents had retired from farming a few years earlier and moved into town but the sisters still thought of the land as *their* farm – although the family had never actually owned it.

The sisters parked their car where they could see the house and the barn. Even though they knew they did not own the land, they were planning to grab some of it. Their covert operation was hardly grand larceny; they simply planned to snatch a few tablespoons of that rich Iowa dirt.

Barbara is a Lutheran minister and the idea came to her that morning as she was going over the committal service in her mind. It hit her when she came to the part where she would say, “earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” She wanted to have some of the dirt from the farm her father had toiled to toss onto his casket as she uttered the traditional words of committal.

Although she had spoken those words for many parishioners as she laid them to rest, she had never said them for her own family. She thought it might help her get the words out if she had her grip on some of the dirt from their farm.

It had rained the night before, so the ground was damp that morning. The sisters knelt down side-by-side as each one scooped up a few wet clumps of earth. They took the mud back to the house, flattened it out on a cookie sheet, and placed it in the oven to dry.

That afternoon at the cemetery, her words came out fine as she sprinkled the dirt on her father’s coffin. “Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” The soil from the farm mingled with the soil of the grave; the common dirt mingled with God’s blessing.¹

These words ministers recite at a committal and on Ash Wednesday as we make the sign of the cross on foreheads, come from the oldest creation story in Genesis. God forms the first man from the ground and one chapter later says that all people will return to the ground. The Hebrew words for “man” and “ground” are nearly identical. The word for man is *adam* and the word for ground is *adamah*. Of course, the story is not a literal account of how the first human body was created, but a poetic reference to the transitory nature of life. Our bodies are fragile and our time on earth passes with computer-like speed.

In the Jewish Scriptures, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Job pick up on this notion of humans beings created from the ground and speak of God as the potter and humans as clay. In today's passage from Second Corinthians, the Apostle Paul latches onto this imagery.

It helps to know that Paul's relationship with the Christian community in Corinth was like a marriage fallen on hard times. Initially, the Christians in Corinth loved and revered Paul. But by the time the letter was written from which today's passage is plucked, divorce loomed on the horizon. While Paul was spreading his message to other communities around the Mediterranean, adversaries of Paul had undermined Paul's message. These false apostles had managed to stir up the Corinthian Christians, and Paul was writing to reassert his teachings. One scholar writes that Paul has "his back against the wall. The small cracks in the unity of the Corinthian community that were apparent in First Corinthians have now widened into large fissures, and the people's animosity seems aimed not at one another but at Paul."²

However, Paul was clear that he was not reasserting *himself*. He was reasserting the message of Christ. His ability to spread the Christian gospel did not derive from any personal talents. The credit belonged entirely to God. He said, "We have this treasure in jars of clay, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us."

Why did Paul use the image of a clay jar? In the ancient world, clay jars had a number of uses. These containers made of earth were used to prepare food, to bake food and to store food. They were used to contain drinking water and wine. Interestingly, they were also used to store money. Archaeologists have dug up hundreds of these jars in which there were coins. Clay jars were the ancient world's version of a piggy bank! Thus, when Paul said, we have this treasure in jars of clay, he meant that we have God's spirit within us, and his audience immediately understood his point. As we place our earthly treasure into a clay pot, God places the divine spirit within us.

Paul's metaphor is instructive. For one, jars of clay are subject to chipping and they are likely to contain imperfections. Presbyterian minister, Shannon Kershner says, "Another way to put Paul's words is that we are all basically cracked pots, cheap jars, fragile and porous. I love that description of you and me, because it acknowledges the truth that none of us has it all together."³

That runs counter to the image that many of us project, doesn't it? We exude confidence, strength, self-reliance, and wit, even though within we have doubts, anxieties, and fears. If someone says something unkind about us, it can crush us. If something wonderful happens to someone else, we can become envious. We are prone to selfishness and we easily become defensive. Our egos, like jars of clay, are as delicate as glass.

This would be reason to despair in a world where we are alone and dependent on ourselves. However, we are not alone. Within this jar of clay, Paul says, we have a treasure; a treasure far more precious than gold. Within this jar of clay God's Spirit dwells. Do you think about that? God's Spirit is within you. Paul says, "It is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness' who shines in our hearts."

One of the premier challenges of faith is to become *aware* of God's Spirit within us. Perceiving the divine within us is extremely difficult for a couple of reasons. For one, God is never absent. Our consciousness depends on contrasts. We perceive light because there is dark. We perceive heat because there is cool. We perceive presence when there is absence. Constant presence is nearly impossible to identify.

The other reason it is difficult to perceive God within us is because we blanket the divine Spirit under layers and layers of ourselves. The thirteenth century mystic, Meister Eckhart, said that "the spiritual life has more to do with subtraction than with addition. (This is especially difficult for those of us who live in the West, because) we keep trying to climb higher up the ladder of spiritual success... We have turned the Gospel into a matter of addition

instead of subtraction. But when we are so full of ourselves, we have little room – and we often think, no need – for God.”⁴

Theologian Richard Rohr points out that “When Carl Jung was in his later years, one of his students read John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and he asked Jung, ‘What has your pilgrimage really been?’ Jung replied: ‘In my case Pilgrim’s Progress consisted in my having to climb down a thousand ladders until I could reach out my hand to the little clod of earth that I am.’ That is a free man. We aren’t really free until we are free from our ego, our reputation, our self-image, our need to be right, our need to be successful, our need to have everything under control.”⁵

It is difficult to perceive God Spirit within us when we bury it under a mountain of needs concocted by our ego. The discipline of contemplative prayer can help us peel back the layers.

Not only does the metaphor of a clay jar remind us that our egos are fragile, but so are our bodies. Sooner or later, clay jars break. And so will we.

Many prefer to avoid discussions of death because they find it too sad and depressing. But failing to face our mortality does not spare us from pain so much as it can cheat us from getting the most out of life. Knowing that our time is limited reminds us of what is genuinely important. Knowing that we will not be here forever helps us to spot the beauty that surrounds us. Knowing that we have a limited amount of time prompts us to use our days wisely.

Writer Kathleen Norris tells of her friend, a young woman who is a brilliant scholar. She was stricken with cancer and over the course of several years she came very close to dying on three occasions. Fortunately, after extensive treatments, she went into remission. Her prognosis is uncertain, but she was able to return to teaching. She remarked to an older colleague, “I would never want to go back (to the way I was living before the cancer) because now I know what each morning means, and I am so grateful just to be alive.” The colleague said, “We have been through so much together the last few years.” The woman responded emphatically, “Yes! And hasn’t it been a blessing!”⁶

Knowing that we are like jars of clay – fragile vessels that will not last forever – is not a curse but a blessing. It awakens us to the importance of each day we have and each person we meet. It beckons us to dig down into the Spirit of God that is within us so that the light of Christ will shine through us.

In what ways will the light of Christ shine through you this week? Only you can decide.

NOTES

1. Barbara Lundblad, “A Strong Sense of Place,” *The Protestant Hour*, January 5, 1997.
2. Walter J. Harrelson, General Editor, *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), p. 2061.
3. Shannon J. Kershner, “Shine On!” May 13, 2018.
4. Richard Rohr, “A Clod of Earth,” *Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditations*, October 19, 2016.
5. Ibid.
6. Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), p.13.

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Eternal God – who was and is and is to come – With your creative breath you animated creation, stirred dry bones to life, and energized your church. You enabled prophets to speak truth to power and commissioned disciples to proclaim the good news. You dwelled among us in the person of Jesus and made us partners in Christ’s ministry.

In every age, you have sent your Spirit to create and re-create, to renew and reform, to help and to heal. Send your Spirit upon us now, and draw us into your creative work.

You formed us, wonder-working God, with the care and imagination of a potter. But we have lived as imperfect creations — failing to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with you. Still, you never abandon us. You shape and re-shape us, and breathe new life into us so that our lives might glorify you.

We pray for this world groaning for redemption, and join our voices with all who yearn for wholeness. Where bodies are fragile, may they find strength in the compassionate care of community. Where communities are broken, may they find healing through the tireless efforts of those committed to justice and reconciliation. Where lives are shattered, may they find comfort in your grace, made real through kind hearts and helping hands. In the wake of two more mass shootings, we are especially mindful of the countless families whose lives have been forever altered due to gun violence. We pray today for those in El Paso and in Dayton who are grieving, those who are injured, those who are helping, those who are in shock. Embrace them with your love, and surround them with your peace.

God of creation — who sees possibility in all things — send your Spirit upon us and energize us again for your work. In your mercy, make us vessels that bear messages of hope to a world in desperate need of good news. In a time when words so often incite hatred and fear, may *our* words proclaim love, acceptance, and peace. In a time when actions so often foster distrust and division; may *our* actions build up, encourage, and unify. Fill us, we pray, so that we might pour ourselves out in service to the Gospel until all creation flourishes.

We pray this and all things in the name of your Son, who gave us words to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.