

“The Cup of Our Life”

2 Corinthians 4:5-12 – May 29, 2016

INTRO: Apparently the Corinthian church, not unlike the contemporary North American church, was impressed with church leaders who were charismatic, but who often loved power. Was it the minister’s personal charisma that made them appealing and gave them authority, or was it their ability to perform wonders? Or *maybe* the person had a ministry firmly grounded in human weakness and actual life experiences which appealed to others. Folks could see in that person someone whose authority came from a capacity to not just endure the experiences of life, but to transcend and transform them. This is what Paul says:

Many people would probably name coffee as the universal beverage. Wherever we gather, it’s typically what we offer to each other. Just head down to our fellowship hall after worship, and you’ll find pots of coffee. We live in a time where coffee shops mean that coffee, rather than a blue plate special, is why people go there. These coffee shops are a hub of social activity for some and an office away from the office for others. In the Milwaukee area alone, I could find listed on the internet well over a hundred options of places which offer basically coffee—Anodyne, Colectivo, Starbucks, Stone Creek, Valentine, are just a few. I’ve heard that Starbucks alone, has more than 80,000 drink combinations. You can ask for decaf or caffeinated, and there’s latte, espresso, cappuccino, Frappuccino, plus about any added flavor you can think of.

People get hooked on one particular kind of coffee and may think they can’t face the day without it. I remember traveling to Jamaica with some coffee loving friends, who were concerned they would have to go a whole week without their Starbucks, only to find that Jamaica’s Blue Mountain coffee would give Starbucks a run for their money.

Our church has made an intentional decision to serve Fair Trade coffee on Sunday mornings. Not only are we supporting those who grow the coffee in a better way, but I’m told Chick has become a barista who makes a pretty good cup of coffee. And I confess, I’m not a coffee drinker. I’ve tried, but it just isn’t my thing. You may be relieved to know that Pastor Tim, your new pastor, is a coffee drinker. He says he’s definitely not a coffee snob though. While he was organist at the Episcopal cathedral in Miami, the rector made horrible coffee, so Tim learned to drink it all--good, bad, and absolutely dreadful.

For me, it’s tea, and I’m hoping there’s a pot of tea covered with a tea cozy in my retirement future! I find that the fragrance of Earl Grey tea can take me back to college days where students were gathered in a music Professor’s living room. And a cup of hot chocolate reminds me of coming home from an afternoon of sledding as a kid.

We may think of what beverages we drink, but I wonder if we think much about the cups from which we drink them? Cups were probably among the first items made by potters in ancient times. Their association with religion are many, as sacred libations have almost always been served in cups or bowls. The Gospels agree that Jesus took a cup at the last supper with his disciples and told them all to drink from it as a sign of their solidarity with him. In the Middle Ages, when relics of the faith became quite important in Christian culture, the cup used at the Last Supper, was sought out everywhere as one of the most sacred objects in the world. That cup, the Holy Grail, is still written about, researched, and becomes the centerpiece of many stories and movies like the *Da Vinci Code*.

Cups are important in our culture, and pottery counters often display dozens of specialized mugs which people buy for others. Perhaps this is because there is something intimate and personal about a cup—something bonding us at once with the earth and with other people. I’ve brought in a number of cups from my cupboard and placed them on the altar, and I can tell you stories about where they have come from, or who gave them to me. You could probably do the same if we were in your kitchen cupboard.

I’ve served in a couple churches where the congregation brought their own personal cups from home—cups that said something specific about their lives, and cups that could be washed and reused, as a commitment to use less paper products. These are the cups that can hold memories of places we’ve visited, companies we’ve worked for, projects we’ve accomplished, connections with loved ones. We can tell some of our life’s story by talking about our cups.

They get worn, stained, chipped, but we may still use them. These cups are a little like us. Many of them have a special shape and size, a personality. Like those well-used cups, we have bumps,

scratches, cracks and chips that keep us from being completely perfect vessels. We have our physical imperfections and we have our internal inadequacies. Yet those flaws don't need to hold us back from living full, faithful lives. The flaws and chips are markings of a well-traveled life and may be a valuable gift for others.

Joan Chittister said: "When we have finally turned the wounds of our souls into the stuff of our wisdom, we are valuable to someone else." When we've learned and grown because of what we've survived, we may just have a perspective someone else could find helpful.

Paul picks up on this image in this letter to the people of Corinth, when he says: "We have this treasure in clay jars." The clay container was the common, basic utensil of ordinary people—used for shipping, storing and drinking liquids and for preparing and eating food. Archaeologists know how fragile those objects were by the large number of pottery shards found at any ancient Mediterranean excavation. Pottery vessels, unlike those made of glass or precious metal, have value only while they are whole and intact. It is to these fragile vessels that Paul tells us, the treasure of the gospel is entrusted.

These clay jars are also connected back to the creation story in Genesis, which reminds us that we're formed from the dust of the ground—we are all fragile, transient, mortal beings. The story goes that on the way home from church one Sunday, a little boy asked his mother, "Is it true that we are all made of dust?" His mother answered that, "Yes, that's what the Bible tells us. It says that we came from dust, and one day we will return to dust." "Well Mommy," the boy said, "when I kneeled down to say my prayers last night, I looked under my bed. And if what you say is true, there were a lot of people coming and going under there."

Paul tells us we are the clay-pot people who have been entrusted with the gospel treasure. In his day, precious objects, coins, jewels, treasures, were regularly kept in these pots. So something very precious, the glory of God, is the treasure we carry in our lives. A "treasure in clay jars" is a kind of double metaphor which recognizes the awesome trust God places on each of us, and at the same time honors our fragility as bearers of God's grace and light to the world. The image allows Paul and us, to celebrate the awesome blessing of life and also realize that in the midst of hard times and difficulties, God still may be able to shine through us.

For Paul, "a correlative of the recognition of human weakness is always the opportunity it gives to God. So the success of his ministry and the vitality of his Christian life don't spring from his own ability and dedication but from the power of God." (Ernest Best)

Because we are God's chosen vessels, God's clay-pot people, we don't need to just build cathedrals or make pilgrimages to special places to prove our faith. Instead, we need to live our lives each day in ways that love and honor God and the people around us.

I believe Paul was trying to make clear to people, that even with all the flaws and frailties of our human lives, we can still be the carriers of God's love. Paul himself was known to those around him, as someone with physical limitations. He wasn't thought of as being someone who had a strong physical body, and he was subject to what he called a recurring "thorn in the flesh." Along with many others who struggle with back issues, I'm thinking his "thorn" was his back! To all appearances he was no more than a cheap, clay pot.

Wouldn't it be something, if we could get used to and more comfortable with our flaws, rather than feeling like we either need to cut ourselves down or build ourselves up?

There's a story about a Japanese businessman who was very wealthy, but was unhappy because he had never really impressed a Zen teacher who lived near him. The businessman ordered a nearly priceless gold tea caddy made for his tea service and invited the Zen teacher to tea, hoping for his approval. The teacher came, drank the tea, but said nothing. The businessman was so angry that he smashed the tea set and the caddy to pieces. The servant who cleaned up the mess took all the bits and pieces to a repair shop, had it glued back together and used it as his own. His master had no use for something that had been broken. When that same Zen teacher returned, he asked to have tea, not with the businessman this time, but with the servant, and he was very appreciative of the beauty of the tea set with all its cracks and flaws.

Sometimes it's the chips and nicks and dents in things that give them real value. It may be the same way with us. Perhaps God, and even the people around us, value us for the little imperfections that make us who we are. So the next time you pick up a cup, take a look at it. Remember that

we are all clay-pot people, and we can be—just as we are, vessels and bearers of God’s tremendous loving energy, held in the cups of our lives, to be shared with the world.

--Sue Burwell