A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*“You Are the Beloved”*

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

June 3, 2018

Thomas Jefferson’s gravestone at Monticello in Charlottesville, VA reads exactly as he wrote it before he died, “Author of the Declaration of Independence, of the state of Virginia, for religious freedom and father of the University of Virginia.”

If St. Paul had written his own headstone I think it might have gone something like this, “Here lies Paul, author of a lot of the New Testament, founding father of many churches, even Corinth, but please don’t blame me for how those people turned out.” Corinth was a thorn in Paul’s heart, mind, and soul.

After Paul wrote the first letter to the Corinthians in about 56 or 57, Timothy came to Corinth for a follow up visit. He found the situation there bad. If you want to get a picture of what was going on, 1 Corinthians gives a tour of the sorriest kind of Christian community: fractured, immoral, feckless, arrogant. It’s what you get when a group of people lowers their liturgical eyes from the horizon of hope and turns their searching eyes to their own navels and their scornful eyes toward one another. It ain’t pretty. Timothy reported back to Paul about what he found there in the community Paul had founded, and for whom he had worked and sweated with zeal.

At this news, Paul drops what he’s doing in Ephesus and makes what turns out to be a “painful visit” to Corinth (2 Cor. 2.1). He threatened to come with a rod (1 Cor. 4.21) but when he arrived, they deemed him to be timid and ineffective when face to face. Apparently (2 Cor. 2.5-11) someone “affronted him publicly and undermined his authority.” Paul decided he needed a cooling-off period, so he left Corinth, planning to return quickly (1 Cor. 16.5). From there it seems that he did not return quickly at all, but wrote another letter, which may be lost, “with many tears” (2 Cor. 3-4). He eventually did make a return visit sometime in late 57 and then wrote most of what we know as 2 Corinthians. \*(Closely following, at some points directly quoting, Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament,* 541-543).

All this to say that here in 2 Corinthians we find in the Apostle Paul, a man matured, aged, humbled, stripped of any idealistic illusions he may have had early on about what people are like, or about his own weaknesses. The gap between our idealistic dreams and our realities is where life is lived. Right there between who we are as rock stars on our best days, and who it seems we are in our worst moments. Paul may have hoped for a smooth relationship with the people he birthed as a church, but in Corinthi it was contested. He may have hoped for their abiding faithfulness to Christ, but they were a mess. He may have hoped for acceptance, peace, harmony, and adoring accolades, but what he got was petulant obstinance and a recurring reminder of his own frailties.

It’s a long way from the 1st century to now, but human nature is still the same. Cecil Sherman, the towering Baptist leader of the last generation, in late life recounted the story of a conflict he had in the days of the civil rights movement. Cecil had come to be pastor of his dream church. He loved these people, but things were not easy. When a black woman expressed interest in joining the church, a member pointed out that a unanimous vote was required to approve new members. In the days that followed, Cecil worked to get the unanimity requirement removed. Though the battle was long and hard, he succeeded, at which point his church member said to him, “I’m going to bury you!” Several years later, Cecil read scripture at the man’s graveside.

So many people slog away in the midst of disappointments, frustrations, and difficult people. This is not, of course, a state reserved for professional clergy or apostles. Life offers plenty of opportunities to be overworked and underappreciated. So many of us are there as well—in the thick of our lives, our ministries, our work, parenting, marriage—the things that we were sure were going to build the secure fortress of our lives against pain and suffering, often become the very things that reveal to us just how frail we are. This is life in the daily grind of humanity.

Oh, sometimes its hard. “We are jars of clay.” Paul does not deny this, but writes in plain speech, “We are jars of clay. What you see in us is true. We are maligned, disrespected, hurt, afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down. It’s a humble confession of a sort, an acknowledgement that the weakness they see in him, he is perfectly capable of seeing in himself. Paul does not claim God-like divine, incontrovertible authority and power over these people; he locates himself as one of them. We’re all made of the same stuff and all face the same kinds of troubles.

We’re all clay pots. That’s what most of the newer English translations say. The old King James reads that we are earthen vessels. I think something is lost when we leave that translation behind. Earthen vessels recalls our origin in the creation story of Genesis 2, when the Lord God reached down and formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living being. God reached down into the *adamah* and created *adam,* humans from the humus. The Prophet Isaiah will confess, “You are the potter, I am the clay.” The biblical account of our being is that we are fashioned by the creative hand of God from the stuff of earth. We’re all made of the same stuff, we humans, these earthen vessels, which are strong, but delicate. Like a pot, we can be broken, we can be chipped, we can be cracked. No one is Iron Man; each of us is Dirt Boy, Soil Girl. Notice they don’t have a superhero called that. The superheroes have to be virtually invulnerable to be strong. Humans aren’t made like that; our weaknesses, our imperfections, are our strengths. Christ didn’t destroy his opponents. He suffered at their hands; his skin could be pierced; his eyes could shed tears; his heart could stop beating. The incarnate son of the living God could die, and he did, though death could not contain him.

Our limitations and even our deaths are ever present realities for us earth bound creatures. As Lent begins we mark one another with ashes and remind one another, “You are but dust and to dust you shall return.” The monks remind one another to keep their deaths always before them, and drug companies know how many of us are reminded every single morning of our aging bodies. It’s just the reality of our existence as finite beings. This is who we are. But this is not all who we are. And that’s the magic, the mystery, the wonder of being human, created in the image of God.

We are earthen vessels so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. What power? What extraordinary power? The power of God within Paul, within in the Corinthians, and within you. If you missed that part, you’re like just about everyone else. We read, “We are clay pots” and we’re like, “Yep, that’s true.” But we miss the startling affirmation that precedes it. Every time.

The God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness, shines in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” Our human identity as earthen vessels draws on the second creation story in Genesis. This draws on the first creation story in Genesis, in which God said, “Let there be light, and there was light.” Paul recalls two of the first most important words and evocative images in all of scripture. We are made of light; we are made of the dirt. We are entangled between the two creation accounts, one in which God hovers above all things, filling the universe with holy light and bringing it to be by holy Word, and the other in which God draws us up out of the dirt.

You know the second part. The mirror reminds you every morning. When you look at yourself, you see the cracks, old regrets and fresh shames whisper in your ear: you are no good, you are dirty, you are worthless.

You think you’re just a plain old clay pot. You are; that’s true. We’re made of the same stuff, and it’s holy stuff, it’s sacred these bodies, these lives and deaths we inhabit, but have you forgotten what’s in you? The Light of the world. The Light that burst forth by the simple Word of God at the dawn of time, the Light by whose power the universe was born, stars and planets flung throughout an expanding universe. This Light, the life-giving creative, divine power and glory, is born within you if Christ is in you. Whatever else Paul was dealing with, he never forgot that. I may be a clay pot, but I have Christ in me shining with glory.

In Christ, we may be clay pots, vulnerable, breakable, but what we have within us is the Light: the power of all creation, the power of liberation (Isaiah 9), the power of illumination, exaltation, inspiration; it is the gift and power of salvation from darkness. This is within you. Do you see this? Do you know this to be true about yourself?

This is not just for Apostles, but for all people. Your being is constituted by the *adamah* and the light of creation. You are the image of God. This is God’s love made manifest in all creation. No matter what happened to him, Paul never lost sight of the remarkable truth he learned from Jesus Christ: he, and his friends, and those who misunderstood and maligned him, those who arrested and killed him, the true story about us all is that we are made by the hand of divine love. You are a clay pot containing, barely containing, the Light of the world. The Light shines through the cracks. As the crowning achievement of creation God did not create iron men, but human beings in whose weakness God’s strength is revealed and in whose foolishness the wisdom of God is made known. These vessels have within them the glory of the Creator of the universe, the Word of God, the Breath of God.

As a child we would load up on Sunday mornings for church which was about a 20 minute drive. My family didn’t talk a lot in the car those mornings. We listened to talk radio. Sundays after worship were for listening to the first quarter of the Cowboys game. Sundays on the way to Sunday School were for listening to Neil Sperry talk about gardening. Oh man, I thought it was boring. Apparently, he’s still on the radio. How old is this guy? I don’t hear him on the radio, but now I don’t think gardening is boring and so I read things he writes from time to time. From him I saw the startling poem that’s on the front cover of the worship guide.

It’s not about gardening, but it is about life and seeing beauty and goodness, the hope of the gospel, where you didn’t see it before, even in yourself.

I'm very ugly
So don't try to convince me that
I am a very beautiful person
Because at the end of the day
I hate myself in every single way
And I'm not going to lie to myself by saying
There is beauty inside of me that matters
So rest assured I will remind myself
That I am a worthless, terrible person
And nothing you say will make me believe
I still deserve love
Because no matter what
I am not good enough to be loved
And I am in no position to believe that
Beauty does exist within me
Because whenever I look in the mirror I always think
Am I as ugly as people say?

(Now read bottom up)

by Abdullah Shoaib

Our identities as creatures are told in metaphors of contrast and irony. We are holy, we are fallen; we are made in the image of Christ, we act like children of Adam and Eve; we have the life of Christ within us; we know all too well our frailties and fears. We are light; we are earthen. We are sinners; we are saints. The contrast and irony of all of this is not as simple as the pottery image, which suggests that one is contained in the other. We have to turn to other images to get at the complex tapestry by which our spirits and bodies are woven together as one as Christ was human and divine, indivisible and inseparable.

Still, the image speaks, this inner and outer life. And it is hopeful. “We do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this Light momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”

We’ll end with a word from Henri Nouwen who wrote a book-length love letter to some friends of his who couldn’t see themselves as beloved creatures of God.

“All I want to say to you is “you are the beloved.” And all I hope is that you can hear these words as spoken to you with all the tenderness and force that love can hold. My only desire is to make these words reverberate in every corner of your being--you are the beloved. (Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved,* 26)

Copyright by Eric Howell, 2018