

Clay Jars

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

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First Presbyterian, Luling

As you know, I've been helping a couple of different friends pack up to move away. Since we got married, Andy and I have moved five times, and each time we've packed ourselves, even the fragile stuff. In those five times moving, we've had only one item broken, which has led me to think of myself as something of a packing expert. I'm not, but I do have a few tricks up my sleeve. I know, for instance, that movers routinely don't notice—at best—or ignore—at worst, a sticker that says "fragile" or "handle with care." One box is the same as another to them. If I were trying to stack boxes in an airless truck when it's 95 degrees outside, I'm not sure I would care very much about fragile stickers either. So if fragile items are going to be protected, it's up to the person packing them to make sure of that. Packing paper plus bubble wrap is usually sufficient, as long as the other items in the box are of similar weight and also packed with bubble wrap. Don't put books in a box with crystal, for instance. But for really precious items that I am really attached to, I go the extra mile. This situation calls for double boxing. Wrap that precious item in the packing paper and the bubble wrap. Then put it in a box that just fits it. Stuff in more paper if needed. Then put that smaller box in a standard moving boxes and add other items. Seal it all up, and that precious item is protected. It's not going to break, and I'll be happy and relieved when I unpack it.

Paul's claim that we hold these treasures in "clay jars" caught my interest, then, given my recent packing activities. Other English translations either say the same, or call them "earthen vessels." Earthen vessels appear throughout the Old Testament. Generally speaking, they are considered inferior to bronze or gold vessels. They're porous, so they absorb ritual impurity and can be defiled easily. They are also inferior because they're fragile. Drop an earthen vessel, and it is going to break. A couple of places in the prophets, they set up a metaphor in which God is the potter and the Israelite nation is the clay jar. The implication is that their nation is fragile, easily destroyed. So for Paul to pick up this metaphor of clay jars is not exactly complimentary...

...but it is realistic and truthful. Paul is talking about the treasure of the Gospel. He and the Corinthians have any number of disagreements, so Paul is reminding them of the basics of what they agree on: Jesus. Jesus is the treasure,

the good news that the Corinthians and Paul agree on. “We have this treasure in clay jars,” Paul says. Who are the clay jars, or what are the clay jars?

There are a couple of answers to that question, and they’re almost the same. The people—Paul and Corinthians and anyone else who believes in Jesus, they are the clay jars. They’re flawed and fragile and vulnerable to being defiled or destroyed. But the treasure they hold is real. The other answer is similar to the Old Testament prophets answer: human institutions are the clay jars. For the prophets, the human institution were the Israelites as a nation; for Paul, the human institutions were these groups of Christians that were becoming known as the church. Because human institutions are made up of humans, they too are flawed and fragile and apt to being defiled or destroyed. Human institutions can indeed have the treasure of the Gospel, but the containers, the ways we hold the Gospel, are likely to be breakable. The treasure endures, but the container may break.

The other tendency humans have is to make a mistake. The Corinthians may have been doing this, and Christians through the centuries most certainly have. The mistake is to think that the clay jar is the treasure. They treat the container of the Gospel, its human holders, as the treasure, and forget that the treasure is not the outside but on the inside. It would be as if we never unwrap the precious item we double boxed when moving. We are worried about the outer boxes getting damaged, and we forget all about the precious treasure inside. The outer boxes somehow become more important than the treasure. So we have churches that treasure their buildings, or their systems, or their programs, and forget that the true treasure is Jesus.

For some reason, God has entrusted God’s very self, the Gospel, the Son Jesus Christ, to these human, clay jars. Likely to get broken. Likely to absorb impurities and uncleanness. Likely to mistake themselves for the treasure. God tends to do this sort of thing. God first entrusted the Gospel to an infant, of all people. God entrusted the Gospel to a group of fishermen and tax collectors and women, of all people. God entrusts the Gospel to the church, of all people, an imperfect clay jar if there ever was one.

Why? Why would God put the great treasure of the Gospel into the clay jar of human hands? Paul says God does this so it will be obvious that the power is God’s alone and not ours. When we clay jars get broken, the Gospel remains. When we clay jars get discouraged and dismayed, the Gospel remains. When we clay jars make mistakes about what the true treasure is, the Gospel remains. Paul puts it a different way in the following verse: “We are afflicted in every way, but

not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.”

The treasure remains, the good news is eternal. The clay jars that hold it may be afflicted and perplexed and persecuted and struck down. Paul experienced all of that, as did Jesus. The Gospel lives, because it is the power of God.

We’re fragile, vulnerable, weak. We’re just human. Limited in our power, susceptible to all kinds of mistakes and shortcomings. We’re clay jars, really. Later on in 2 Corinthians (12:9) Paul tells them that Jesus said to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” We hold this treasure in clay jars, and we are the clay jars. The power of the Gospel is the treasure. In our weakness, in our fragility, in our mistakes and mess-ups, the power of the Gospel endures and is made perfect.