

Sunday Apr. 25, 2021
Lesson 8: Vessels for the Lord
Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4: 7-18

Context:

This week, we continue on in the season of Easter with an excerpt from a letter to the Corinthians in the New Testament. The lesson focuses on how Jesus gave us an example of maintaining a faithful spirit in all circumstances. As we explore the excerpt, we are reminded of how God shapes and molds us to bring glory to God.

This section of Paul's letter comes as he closes after describing how God has been at work in his heart and the importance of ministry in Corinth. He declares how the light of Christ has guided them and how Christ is in their hearts. While their outward appearances may not be more than an earthenware vessel, a cheap clay pot, the light in those clay pots is powerful.¹ Paul sets up this analogy to discuss both their own bodies as well as the places where they tuck away hope and strength.

Paul's writings always point to the fragility of humanity in relation to God. For Paul, a correlative of the recognition of human weakness is always the opportunity it gives to God.² In this case, Paul points to how the humans are besieged by all sorts of things from confusion to abandonment; yet through all of these things, God is present and with them.

Paul ties his resilience to the strength of the cross and what Jesus said about picking up one's cross to follow him. Paul of course does not deliberately seek suffering; because of the presence of Jesus in his life he faces the suffering with a different perspective.³ There is no escape from suffering while we live and although we are not to seek it, we are reminded of Jesus suffering, dying, and then of course his resurrection. We are reminded life is within us even in the midst of the most difficult circumstances.

Paul's words remind the Corinthians of the power of Christ in their lives even when there is uncertainty in present circumstances. Gifts such as faith remind them of how the Lord is always at work. We are beneficiaries of a faith to sustain and hold even in the most difficult of times.

The closing words of this passage point to how Paul knows how difficult life can be even with bodies beginning to break down and feel the effects of weariness and age. Yet he reminds us of the gift of the Spirit renewing us internally each day. In a world where there was potentially persecution, a new perspective is given.⁴ While Paul and the Corinthians may feel the weight of the world, there is someone who carries the burden with them.

¹ Ernest Best, "Second Corinthians," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 40.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 42.

⁴ Ibid., 45.

Application

Have you ever seen a potter work with clay? Perhaps if you've ever had an opportunity to go to a class with pottery, you've been able to make your own vase or plate. Or maybe if not a pottery class, maybe you've done something like paint your own creation or a class on mini stain glass.

While in divinity school, I had a chance to go to a class on working with mini stain glass. We never did anything large or complex, but instead worked with smaller pieces. I absolutely loved worked with the glass and learning how it all worked. I remember my absolute favorite design were two small glass bowls.

I decided to make them representative of the two sacraments in the United Methodist Church with browns and reds representing Holy Communion, and blues and whites representing baptism. I put every stone in place and then allowed it to sit in the kiln and come together. The result was a set of bowls to remind me of the calling from God to preside over these two means of grace in the community of faith.

As I look at these two bowls, I can see why Paul uses treasure in clay pots to allude to God and the treasure God has given us. Just as a potter works with clay, God has molded us into clay pots. Over time, we may have lines and grow brittle with age. Yet the treasure within us is one God has placed there and nothing will ever wear that part of us out.

Paul and the early Christian community knew about pain and hardship. Paul was constantly traveling, never knowing what would happen after he left a community of faith. Early Christian communities had to contend with questions around conversion and being a part of the Roman Empire. At times, communication was spotty as it may have taken weeks, even months, for correspondence to get from one place to another. And as history books will reveal, the early Christian community was ripe for persecution as minority groups were scapegoats for violence in the Roman Empire.

Yet Paul did not want the early Christian community to fall into either despair or even the martyr complex, an unfortunate development which causes even issues today in Christianity. Instead, Paul wants the early church to remember how God's Spirit cannot be killed or diminished. God's Spirit will always reach out to humanity, reminding us of the gift of faith and the gift of perseverance to continue on in to the future.

Resilience is often a word we discuss in the realm of leadership, and rarely in the church. Yet resilience is what Paul speaks to as he addresses the Corinthians, encouraging them to look forward to what God can and will do through them even in the most despondent of circumstances. The good news is resilience is a gift from God to give them strength for the journey ahead. God has formed them and us to be this way in this age and the age to come.

Resilience may be something that comes more naturally for some than for others. And yet it is something to be cultivated and nurture especially when times are difficult or seem overwhelming. Paul's words remind us we are all capable of possessing this resilience and finding the ways to help us become resilient.

I've found, just as Paul suggests, our model comes from Jesus. He gives us the strength and the example. He is the one who shows us how to see new life when nothing is in sight.

In my own personal life, I have found that resilience can be cultivated with prayer, scripture reading, receiving Holy Communion, and holy friendships. Holy friendships perhaps take the longest time to cultivate and yet they are some of the greatest gifts. As we find people who we can vent to or be silly around even when things are hard, we are reminded God has designed us to not do life on our own. We are given all the tools we need and have been shaped by our God to press on with a faithful spirit even in the hardest of circumstances.

What are the disciplines you practice to help you cultivate resilience? Why is Jesus's suffering important for us in thinking about our lives? Who are the people who are your holy friends, those who love you and support you in all seasons of life?

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