

Crackpots or Cracked Pots?

A sermon on 2 Corinthians 4:5-12 by Nathan Nettleton, 2 June 2024

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Message

Those who faithfully follow Jesus and proclaim his message are flawed human beings who will not often appear successful or impressive.

Sermon

In the second Bible reading we heard tonight, the one from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, we heard the Apostle Paul use an image that has since become a common saying. He said, "we have this treasure in earthen vessels," or in other translations, in "jars of clay".

This image has become sufficiently popular that there are even churches that have taken it as their name. We may end having a strong connection with one of them, because the Earthen Vessels Baptist Church here in Melbourne have begun some preliminary conversations with us about the possibility of finding themselves a new home in the church building that we are no longer using. Very early stages, but it is a possibility, and it has nothing to do with this sermon except the name!

But what Paul's image and that church's name acknowledge is the paradox of how the wonderful and transformative "treasure" of the gospel is so often found embodied in fragile and flawed people who are looked down on by others as unimpressive and unconvincing. When Paul first used this image, he was responding to something of a divide in the church at Corinth. Some people were starting to gravitate to a kind of early "prosperity gospel" which was being peddled by some new alpha type leaders who were charismatic, well-connected, influential, and successful. These new leaders and their devotees were dismissing Paul as weak and unimpressive, not worth following.

Well, says Paul, a treasure stored in fragile clay jars is no less valuable a treasure than one stored in a polished and silk lined presentation box. And furthermore, he seems to imply, don't get sucked in by the lovely polished and silk lined presentation box. It may contain nothing but cheap fakes. It's not unlike the more modern saying, "Don't judge a book by its cover."

This relates closely to a theme that Paul returns to numerous times. In his previous letter to the Corinthians, for example, he begins with the paradox of foolishness and wisdom, arguing that the wisdom of God is often dismissed as foolishness by those who are seen as clever and influential by the majority of people in our world.

The foolishness-wisdom paradox focusses more on the content of the message, and how it is received, but this image of the clay jars goes more specifically to the impressions of the messenger. This has always been the trump card of those who promote a prosperity gospel or something similar. Their argument is that God wants you to be flourishing in every area of your life, which is true, but they then push it further so that flourishing equates to being healthy, wealthy, beautiful, popular, influential and successful, and the messenger had better measure up if they want to be taken seriously. But then those attributes morph to become indistinguishable from the way they are seen and understood in modern celebrity culture.

Paul stands his ground on this. He doesn't try to argue against their portrayal of him to make himself look more impressive. Yes, he says, my health is fragile; I have flaws that are as frustrating as a thorn in the flesh; I have only a meagre income from a simple manual trade; I'm unpopular enough to have been repeatedly beaten up and run out of town; I'll probably die in jail if I'm not executed first. No modern success story here. But the power and wisdom of God have already come to us in a person who had nowhere to lay his head and who ended up the victim of a gruesome public execution on a cross. No modern success story there either, but behold the power and wisdom of God.

Now we may have heard this message a thousand times, but it struggles to get traction in our hearts and minds when the popular messages of beauty and success are constantly fed to us with well resourced advertising and social media campaigns. I can't count how many times I've heard one or another of you here in this congregation despairing over how much of a failure you are and how useless you must be to God. I probably can't count the times I've heard the same sort of things in my own self-talk inside my head. We all fall for it.

And yet when I look back over my life and ministry, I can see that as often as not it has been my flaws and failings that God was able to use to reach other people with a life-changing touch of grace. Like I'm very lucky to have a wonderful marriage now, but I reckon that more people have found a path to grace and hope upon finding out that I had a disastrous failed marriage before this one.

As much as we obsess over the air-brushed, picture-perfect lives of carefully curated celebrities, it is actually the survival and faltering progress of the more obviously scarred and damaged that inspires hope that maybe we too can make something worthwhile out of the shattered bits and pieces of our lives. It's the cracked earthen vessels that enable the true treasure to be seen and appreciated.

Perhaps even more importantly, it is the cracked earthen vessels that enable us to appreciate where that treasure comes from. Their flaws and fragility make it obvious that they haven't made it on their own natural advantages; they have been carried through safely by the grace of God when the odds seemed stacked against them. The treasure they carry is the goodness and grace of God and the healing and life-giving power of God's Spirit.

When people present with an oh so polished and glamorous appearance, it can easily leave us, at least initially, wondering whether there's much substance underneath, or whether they've been handed all manner of privileges just on the strength of their beautiful exterior. I was thinking about this last night when Margie and I went out to see a concert by a moderately famous and very cool singer from overseas. Later in the concert, he did a couple of songs that sang the praises of his wife and how deeply he loved and appreciated her. Then he invited her out on stage to join him for a couple of songs.

Now at that moment, if a woman who looked like a Barbie doll had walked out on stage, I reckon more than a few of us would have wondered whether she was really half as special as he said, or whether he was just another easily distracted man who couldn't tell the difference between glamorous sexy looks and genuine substance. As it was, it was easier to believe that she was the treasure he said she was because she looked like a normal person. She didn't walk straight off the cover of a magazine, so you now know it wasn't a Mick Jagger concert. She

was clearly not a cheap fake in a shiny polished box, and her credibility and the credibility of their relationship benefitted from that.

For those of you who are ridiculously beautiful, though, sorry. I'm not putting you down! I'm not saying that your gorgeousness proves you have no substance. I'm just saying that it might take people a bit longer to see past your good looks to appreciate the quality of the treasure inside. That may not be fair on you, but extreme beauty like yours has so often been a manufactured distraction, that the rest of us are a bit wary of getting sucked in again.

For all of us though, the message is extremely good news. God is not distracted by either our physical beauty, or our lack of it. And whatever we look like on the outside – polished display boxes or cracked earthen vessels – God also does not demand that we measure up to some barely attainable standard of inner beauty and perfection. For the treasure that the Apostle Paul is talking about is not our own inner qualities, even if they've been polished up by thousands of dollars worth of good psychotherapy. The treasure is God's love and mercy and transforming power at work inside us. Every part of us, both inner and outer, is part of the fragile earthen vessels that Paul is talking about, and the treasure is God's gift to us.

Scan the faces of the congregation gathered here this evening, or at least those who've got their cameras turned on. If you've been here any length of time, you probably know quite a bit about the flaws and fragilities of many of the people you see. There are no perfect people here. But you have probably also seen God working in and sometimes through those same people, and as often as not, what God was doing in or through them was making greater use of their flaws and fragilities than their most developed strengths. Have you noticed that?

Well, that's not just about them. It's about you too. Whatever it is that is most frustrating you about yourself and about where life is at for you, don't believe for a moment that it renders you useless to God or beyond the reach of God's love and care. God is there with you, even in that, perhaps even especially in that.

That doesn't mean that your scars and hurts and troubles are good things. If we read 2nd Corinthians as a whole, we'd see that the Apostle Paul makes it perfectly clear that he frequently feels overwhelmed and close to defeated by the things he's struggling with, and he frequently cries out to God to be set free from these things. But nevertheless, he recognises that his flaws and struggles do not in any way limit the good that God can do in him and through him. And he's urging you to recognise that the same is just as true for you.

Sometimes, following Jesus and living for God's love will, in itself, bring us troubles or just result in people looking down on us and seeing us as irrelevant losers. If you start standing with Jesus to love and defend those who society is choosing to despise and reject, then you may face some real hostility and aggression. And your persecutors might not even know or care whether it has anything to do with Jesus.

But again, none of that will cut you off from God or make it harder for God to work in and through you. As we sang in our psalm tonight, "How rich are the depths of God whose ways we do not know." Whether you are a cracked clay pot, or one who is being dismissed by the world as nothing but a crackpot, God is offering you the rich treasure of transformative love and grace. You don't have to measure up first. You just have to open yourself and say "Yes."