

Treasures in a Clay Jar

By John Carlson

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Scripture

2 Corinthians 4 (see full text at end of sermon)

Message Text: 1, 7-9, 15-18.

Sermon

Some years ago there was an eye witness account from New York City, on a cold day in December:

A little boy, about 10-years-old, was standing before a shoe store on the sidewalk, barefooted, peering through the window, and shivering with cold.

A lady approached the young boy and said,
“My, but you're in such deep thought staring in that window!”

“I was asking God to give me a pair of shoes,” was the boy's reply.

The lady took him by the hand, went into the store, and asked the clerk to get half a dozen pairs of socks for the boy. She then asked if he could give her a basin of water and a towel. He quickly brought them to her. She took the little fellow to the back part of the store and, removing her gloves, knelt down, washed his little feet, and dried them with the towel.

By this time, the clerk had returned with the socks. Placing a pair upon the boy's feet, she purchased him a pair of shoes. She tied up the remaining pairs of socks and gave them to him. She patted him on the head and said, “No doubt, you will be more comfortable now.” As she turned to go, the astonished kid caught her by the hand, and looking up into her face, with tears in his eyes, asked her: “Are you God's wife?”

Scripture takes a whole lot of opportunity to remind us that WE are not the message. We are the messengers, entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation. We are the simple, sometimes leaky, always fragile clay pots carrying the message of justice, hope and love. We have been entrusted to carry this message to a world which is largely blind to the vision of the kingdom, to how this love can transform lives. So you and I live in this fragile balance of understanding God's grace in our own experience and trying to share that love with a world which is at best skeptical and at worst terrified.

A friend of mine shared this experience: Whenever I'm disappointed with my spot in life, I stop and think about little Jamie Scott. Jamie was trying out for a part in the school play. His mother told me that he'd set his heart on being in it, though she feared he would not be chosen. On the day the parts were awarded, I went with her to collect him after school. Jamie rushed up to her, eyes shining with pride and excitement. "Guess what, Mom," he shouted, and then said those words that have been a lesson to me since.... "I've been chosen to clap and cheer."

I am reminded how often our biblical tradition describes how we have been chosen. In fact, the entire history of our faith is a lesson in God's choosing people, events and circumstances to inject justice, love and hope into an alienated world. In those times when we struggle to appreciate our useful purpose in life, remember being chosen. Do you remember a time when you were an elementary age kid and you stood waiting in the crowd of kids? Waiting to be chosen by the team captain to be on the team? Do you remember being the first chosen? Do you remember being the last chosen? And what if you didn't make the team? No worries today. We have been chosen, a fragile clay pot, to carry a healing message to a broken world.

I will share a personal experience from my professional life: Some years ago I was executive director of my agency. I had many occasions to visit juvenile detention centers to interview kids in lockup to determine acceptance into our community foster care program. On this particular day, I interviewed a young man in the state detention center in Adams County. His name was Mike, age 17. His charges and history did not look favorable. Completing my interview I stepped out of the cell and consulted with detention staff. Then I made my decision and went back into the cell and said this: "Mike, I want you to come to our program." There was dead silence. Mike did not say a word. I wondered what I said wrong? Why wouldn't he be excited? Pretty soon tears began to drip down his cheeks. I said, "Mike, what's wrong?" He looked up and said: "Nothing. It's just that this is the first time I have ever been wanted."

I remember that day feeling like a fragile clay jar, but sharing a message of justice and hope for Mike. He came to our program, did well, surprised the legal system, graduated. The Thanksgiving message today is that God's love, grace and healing is more powerful than the destructive forces and there are signs of his activity in every corner. There are green shoots to be watered. There is justice done to be clapped and cheered.

A few years ago there was a national news story of a girl in California who, at age 11, was abducted. She was found and reunited with her family. But the stunning part of the story? She was age 29 when she was found and returned. Her mother and step-father had reportedly been living in hope, even under a cloud of suspicion, for 18 years. Not knowing what happened. But every day for 18 years waking up in the morning to wonder if this is the day they will hear some news. Why would you live in hope like that for 18 years? Why would you never give up? Because you loved. Love is the motivational force for all living matter. Flowers turn their direction because they love

sunlight. A family dog will perform a miraculous rescue because it loved. And you and I will do both awesome and amazing things because we are driven by the power of love. But the wisdom is this: we cannot drive love. We cannot create it. We cannot force it. We cannot improve on it. Love is of God. You think shit happens. No. No. No. Love happens. Shit stinks. Love happens. And we are the fragile clay jars who get to carry that hope out to a needy world. That's worth giving thanks over.

I hold up a glass, filled half way up with water. And you know the story. Half the folks would tell me the glass is half full. Half the folks would say it is half empty. And we go on believing those are the only two options. Two ways to look at it. Half full or half empty. But what if! What if someone came along and looked at the glass and said, you know what? It looks to me like the glass is twice as big as it needs to be. Oh. Another whole way of looking at it. Perhaps our expectations are larger than God's grace needed at this time. Here is a third dimension. Our treasure of love is the third dimension. Love has the capacity to understand life in a whole new way. Love just might be the treasure we've found holding in our clay pots.

The Scripture Text from THE MESSAGE translation:

¹⁻² Since God has so generously let us in on what he is doing, we're not about to throw up our hands and walk off the job just because we run into occasional hard times. ⁵⁻
⁶ Remember, our Message is not about ourselves; we're proclaiming Jesus Christ, the Master. All we are is messengers, errand runners from Jesus for you. It started when God said, "Light up the darkness!" and our lives filled up with light as we saw and understood God in the face of Christ, all bright and beautiful.

⁷⁻¹² If you only look at *us*, you might well miss the brightness. We carry this precious Message around in the unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives. That's to prevent anyone from confusing God's incomparable power with us. As it is, there's not much chance of that. You know for yourselves that we're not much to look at. We've been surrounded and battered by troubles, but we're not demoralized; we're not sure what to do, but we know that God knows what to do; we've been spiritually terrorized, but God hasn't left our side; we've been thrown down, but we haven't broken. Every detail works to your advantage and to God's glory: more and more grace, more and more people, more and more praise!

¹⁶⁻¹⁸ So we're not giving up. How could we! Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us, on the inside, where God is making new life, not a day goes by without his unfolding grace. These hard times are small potatoes compared to the coming good times, the lavish celebration prepared for us. There's far more here than meets the eye. The things we see now are here today, gone tomorrow. But the things we can't see now will last forever.

One day a young Indian Brave was on a journey home when he came to the banks of a wide river. Staring hopelessly at the great obstacle in front of him, he pondered for hours on just how to cross such a wide barrier. Just as he was about to give up he saw an old Chief on the other side of the river. The young Brave yelled out, "Oh wise one, can you tell me how to get to the other side of this river"?

The Chief pondered for a moment and looked up and down the river and yelled across, "My son, you are ON the other side".

Here is the new dimension. The new way of thinking. We are called. We are chosen. We are where we need to be to give witness to God's redeeming love and his healing power to all.

The Message

2 Corinthians 4

4¹⁻² Since God has so generously let us in on what he is doing, we're not about to throw up our hands and walk off the job just because we run into occasional hard times. We refuse to wear masks and play games. We don't maneuver and manipulate behind the scenes. And we don't twist God's Word to suit ourselves. Rather, we keep everything we do and say out in the open, the whole truth on display, so that those who want to can see and judge for themselves in the presence of God.

3-4 If our Message is obscure to anyone, it's not because we're holding back in any way. No, it's because these other people are looking or going the wrong way and refuse to give it serious attention. All they have eyes for is the fashionable god of darkness. They think he can give them what they want, and that they won't have to bother believing a Truth they can't see. They're stone-blind to the dayspring brightness of the Message that shines with Christ, who gives us the best picture of God we'll ever get.

5-6 Remember, our Message is not about ourselves; we're proclaiming Jesus Christ, the Master. All we are is messengers, errand runners from Jesus for you. It started when God said, "Light up the darkness!" and our lives filled up with light as we saw and understood God in the face of Christ, all bright and beautiful.

7-12 If you only look at *us*, you might well miss the brightness. We carry this precious Message around in the unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives. That's to prevent anyone from confusing God's incomparable power with us. As it is, there's not much chance of that. You know for yourselves that we're not much to look at. We've been surrounded and battered by troubles, but we're not demoralized; we're not sure what to do, but we know that God knows what to do; we've been spiritually terrorized, but God hasn't left our side; we've been thrown down, but we haven't broken. What they did to Jesus, they do to us—trial and torture, mockery and murder; what Jesus did among them, he does in us—he lives! Our lives are at constant risk for Jesus' sake, which makes Jesus' life all the more evident in us. While we're going through the worst, you're getting in on the best!

13-15 We're not keeping this quiet, not on your life. Just like the psalmist who wrote, "I believed it, so I said it," we say what we believe. And what we believe is that the One who raised up the Master Jesus will just as certainly raise us up with you, alive. Every detail works to your advantage and to God's glory: more and more grace, more and more people, more and more praise!

16-18 So we're not giving up. How could we! Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us, on the inside, where God is making new life, not a day goes by without his unfolding grace. These hard times are small potatoes compared to the coming good times, the lavish celebration prepared for us. There's far more here

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