

**Weekend of Sunday, June 3, 2018**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 9/Proper 4/Year B**

**Primary Text: 2 Corinthians 4:5-12**

**Sermon Title: “Clay Jars and Little Lights”**

## **Theme**

*When we carry out God’s ministry we do so not for our glory but for the sake of Jesus Christ whom we proclaim as Lord. The power for ministry comes from God, not us, so that we persevere no matter what, trusting in God’s power and promises at work through us.*

## **Text**

<sup>1</sup>Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. <sup>2</sup>We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. <sup>3</sup>And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. <sup>4</sup>In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. <sup>5</sup>For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. <sup>6</sup>For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

<sup>7</sup>But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. <sup>8</sup>We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup>persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup>always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. <sup>11</sup>For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. <sup>12</sup>So death is at work in us, but life in you.

## Sermon

As I was looking ahead at the reading prescribed for June weekends of worship, I noticed that for several weeks in a row the Second Readings came from the same book, Second Corinthians, or as our President would refer to it, 2 Corinthians. And so I decided to turn those readings, more or less, into a short four-week sermon series, that I am starting today.

I would like to begin each week with a little information about the author, the apostle Paul, the community of Corinth, the overall nature of the two letters that bear their name, First and Second Corinthians, before getting into the content of the passage for each weekend and gleaning what God is telling us through the apostle Paul.

The Apostle Paul's story began under another name. Paul was previously known as Saul, and his story of conversion from a blood-thirsty persecutor of Christians to the untiring Apostle to the Gentiles is told in the book of Acts.

In a nutshell, Paul, then known as Saul of Tarsus, was an over-zealous Pharisee. Again the Pharisees were a sect of Judaism among whose primary concern was the strict observance and adherence to the Law, the Law being that which was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai and its interpretation. What that means for us and our understanding of Saul is that Saul sought and received permission from the High Priest in Jerusalem to persecute the followers of Jesus Christ because he believed the teachings of Jesus violated Mosaic Law. Once he received that permission he zealously harassed, and even jailed, anyone who followed those teachings. And then once jailed, he would get the prisoners to tell him who the other Christians in the community were, and then round them up too.

The first record of Saul is in Acts 7:58 where he oversaw the stoning of the disciple Stephen, the first martyr of the Christian era.

But then, while on the road to Damascus, Saul was struck by lightning and blinded. And while blind he had a life-changing encounter with the risen Lord Jesus Christ, who famously said, "<sup>Acts 9:4</sup>Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" You see, the post-Resurrection understanding of the Church is that the followers of "<sup>Acts 9:2</sup>the

Way" as the young Church was known at that time, are literally the Body Christ. Persecuting its members was the same thing as persecuting Christ himself.

Well, to make a long story short, Saul was ministered back to health by some Christians who taught him the Gospel. Their teaching and ministering along with his own encounter with Jesus Christ caused him to repent from his wicked ways and convert to Christianity and accept a call to become an apostle, and not just an apostle, the Apostle to the Gentiles. That was a big deal then, because the will of the LORD to take the Gospel to the Gentiles had not yet been revealed to the rest of the apostles, those who had first-hand eye-witness experience of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, they had heard of Saul and were more than a little concerned about his sincerity.

Well along that journey of winning over the other apostles and beginning his work taking the Gospel to the Gentiles, his name was changed to Paul, as a sign of that transition in his life. And for the next several years, the former Saul, then Paul, travelled tirelessly and endured persecution of his own to spread the Gospel to the Gentiles.

**Slide** That brings us to the community of Corinth.

Corinth was and remains an important port located on the Isthmus of Corinth. An isthmus is a narrow land bridge between bodies of water. The Isthmus of Corinth is less than four miles wide and separates the Aegean Sea on the southeast side of the isthmus from the Ionian Sea on the west of Greece.

**Slide** Interestingly enough, over the course of human history there have been attempts to traverse the isthmus to shorten the long sea trade routes. Attempts to dig a canal through it to allow ship traffic began as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE and in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE Emperor Nero used Jewish slaves to attempt it. A canal was finally successfully finished in 1893.

I told you that so that you can understand that Corinth was an important and wealthy city then. It was a center of commerce and trade and because it was also an intersection of many cultures, the make-up of the city was also quite cosmopolitan, and there were many forms of pagan religions practiced there. So we shouldn't be

surprised to learn that the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Corinthian Church was made up mostly of Gentile converts from the predominately pagan religions of Corinth and Greece.

I have been a Christian all my life and a pastor of the church for over 20 years, but I still have this innate urge to revert to a selfish and sinful self that you wouldn't recognize – because I try to present myself as a saint when I am in public. But I assure you, there is a beast in me that I constantly have to keep chained up.

Imagine, and maybe this is the case for some of you, being a convert to Christianity from some other religion, or no religion at all. Maybe for your whole life there was a behavior that was permissible, that as a Christian is not. Perhaps we can understand the inner struggle the Corinthians had, and the rebelliousness that Paul addressed in his letters to the Corinthians.

The Second Readings for the next several weeks come from Second Corinthians and that means there must be a First Corinthians and of course most of you know there is. But there is much evidence that indicates that there was at least one letter from Paul to the Corinthians before First Corinthians. Bible scholars call this lost letter, Letter A.

In First Corinthians, Paul dealt with many social and moral issues that existed in the Corinthian Church. Now ask a Christian what they know about First Corinthians and most people will mention Chapter 13, "the Love Chapter." It is the most popular passage of scripture for weddings. That is because brides and grooms think it's all about love. Love is patient and kind and so on. But actually, the Corinthians were so ornery and sinful that Paul ripped into them in First Corinthians and in Chapter 13 he scolded them writing, "You don't even know what love is! Love is patient and kind and so on."

Well, that scolding didn't go well and so Paul made an urgent and unplanned visit to Corinth. After he arrived the Apostle was personally attacked and was so unwelcomed that he felt forced to leave. Upon returning to Ephesus, Paul composed an emotional letter to the Corinthians expressing his grief over the Corinthian Church. This letter was also lost but is known as Letter C.

Paul's emissary Titus eventually brought Paul the good news that the Corinthians had responded favorably to his strongly worded letter and had taken appropriate

corrective action. However, Titus also brought news of a new threat: flamboyant missionaries from Judea had arrived in Corinth and were working to undermine Paul's credibility. Paul responded by writing another letter which we know as Second Corinthians, our Second Reading, and the subject matter of this short sermon series.

In Second Corinthians Paul had several distinct goals:

- C1&2 - Announced his plans to return soon to refute some charges levied against him
- C3-7 – Provided perspective on his suffering and weakness that was being used against him by these new missionaries
- C8-9 – Encouraged the Corinthians to take up a collection for the poor Christians in Jerusalem
- C10-12 – Warned that he would directly confront the intruding missionaries and expose them as frauds
- C13 – Prepared the Corinthians for his visit which will include a thorough reckoning of lingering sinful attitudes and actions.

Finally then, to the reading for today from Chapter 4.

Paul wrote that it isn't easy being him. With regard to the Corinthians, he had to do the hard work of confronting people with their sinfulness. Today in our *anything goes, mind your own business* permissive culture, we don't do that. I have, on a couple of occasions, had to step into a situation and ask the offending party to stop their bad behavior, but it doesn't happen regularly. People tend to self-exclude themselves if living up to what they believe is the Christian standard is in conflict with their lifestyle.

But Paul was trying to convert people from their sinful pagan past and shape their new Christian lives by the example of Christ and his own. With all I have told you about the culture of Corinth we can understand how difficult that must have been. But in spite of his frustration and anger for the <sup>2</sup>"shameful things" they do, he did not want to see them perish to the evil one. In fact, Paul gives us the impression that he cannot help himself. Spreading the Good News of the Gospel is not only his burden given to him by Christ himself, but it is also his passion. In verse 6 he wrote

that it is as if the light of Christ shines into his heart and then comes out of his heart for others. I don't know if Paul had heard the Gospel according to Matthew, but in it Jesus said, "**Matthew5:16** **Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.**"

Paul encouraged his readers to let their *little lights shine* as the old song goes.

And in the second half of this passage, Paul referenced "<sup>7</sup>this treasure in clay jars". Here he made no apology for his humanity. His own physical being was like a clay jar. Others, perhaps these false missionaries, perhaps members of the Corinthian Church, may do physical harm to him, but their evil intent will not change God, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, or his message. In fact, through his own persecution, the Gospel might just be furthered.

### **Raisin' the Bar Challenge**

Well, Pastor, what does all this mean for us? I am so glad you asked.

I can relate just a little with Paul's grasp of the culture of Corinth in this letter, perhaps you can too. No, we are not, and likely will not, face any real physical persecution for our faith. Likely we will not be afflicted or crushed or struck down because of our faith. But I fear we have an even more insidious enemy. You see, the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist, while filling our head with high-minded thoughts.

What I think we can relate to here is that we are facing an enemy that disguises itself as:

- doing the best we can for our children,
- having an attitude of *good enough* when it comes to the things of God like our spiritual lives,
- and presuming someone else will do that which is every Christian's duty.

As was demonstrated in the First Reading and in the Gospel Reading, with regard to the example of the Sabbath, form follows function. God gives us everything we have; time, talents, and treasures, so that we lack nothing we need and indeed have much that we want, some more than others. God is that generous with us because

God loves us and wants to see us develop into disciples of Jesus Christ. God is just like that proud parent on graduation day, imagining all the possibilities that exist for his children as we grow and mature.

Sadly, I think the more blessed we are, the more we grow and mature, the more selfish we get. This was the problem in Corinth. They were a prosperous well-educated community and therefore were difficult for Paul to shepherd.

I don't want that said about any of us. Here is what we need to do:

Each of us needs to be involved in the Spiritual Disciplines. If you don't know what I am talking about, they are also known as the Seven Faith Practices and they shape the ministry we do here at Zion. In the track racks for example there is a trifold brochure on each one. They describe how we provide opportunities for the membership to live them out.

But you don't pick and choose your way through the Seven Faith Practices. You can't say that you are a prayer warrior and therefore you don't need to read the Bible, or because you work in our Food Distribution ministry you don't need to give of your finances. It is true, one may be driven more by one area of ministry than another, but we don't get to leave one or two of them out.

And when we live out our Christian lives through the Seven Faith Practices we become disciplined in the ways of Christ. And while good works do not get us into heaven, God is certainly pleased when we live God-honoring lives.

Yes, as Paul wrote, we are just clay jars. We are here for a time, and then one day the time to demonstrate our life in Christ will come to an end, and we too will be gathered to heaven with all the saints who have gone on before us. But with the lives we lived while here, we should leave a legacy of the light of Christ shining through us. Let your little light shine.

## **Prayer**

Almighty and ever-living God, you love everything you have created and desire that all return thanks and praise to you through the living of our lives. Forgive us when we get full of ourselves and turn away from you and into ourselves. And inspire us

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anew to use the Seven Faith Practices to deepen our lives of faith. We pray this in  
the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen