

This morning's message is all about a treasure, one that we all possess but don't often acknowledge... and this is the time and place to do so.

We've turned the page and moved another letter forward in our Sizzlin' Summer Sermon Series, to the second (or likely third) missive the Apostle Paul sent to Christians in Corinth. After Paul first visited Corinth, he continued his journeys on to Galatia and Phrygia (central Turkey), Ephesus, Macedonia and Achaia (Thessalonica). He also traveled to the 'home church' in Jerusalem, before returning to cities in Asia Minor. Paul got around! All this while the church in

Corinth was not sitting still. They were trying their best to live out the gospel and to understand what had been handed to them in the message of Christ. It's difficult for us to know just what was going on in those house churches, but scholars are sure that Paul had shared a 'harsh letter' with

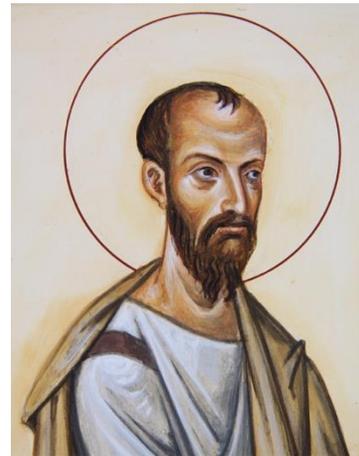


them already. He refers to it early in this letter (2Cor.2:1-3). This may have been about 'false apostles', ('Chloe's or Apollo's people'?) someone sharing new teachings, perhaps even dismissing the validity of Paul's own ministry among them. So with these words Paul reinforces his love and concern for them, as well as clarifying exactly what the 'gift of God' in the gospel is. There is a treasure in the gospel that they (and we) too often take for granted, a treasure that instills both gratitude and response.

Also importantly, in between the writing of these letters, Paul experienced more hardship than we normally acknowledge. Lots of attention is usually given to Paul's 'doctrine' and theological arguments and not as much to the difficulties he endured in making his case in the first place. Later in this letter (Chapter 11) he recounts how he suffered and what he endured to continue to share the Word with them.

A brief summary includes imprisonment, flogging (five times forty lashes minus one), being beaten with rods, pelted with stones, being shipwrecked, a night and a day in the open sea, danger from bandits, sleeplessness, hunger, thirst, nakedness and cold.

Besides all this, he faced the daily pressure of concern for all the churches he had helped to found (not just in Corinth), which was an uphill struggle. In each of these situations he dealt with a particular dynamic, what Dr. Mike Gorman terms the 'theopolitics' of a new community.



Paul, the 'first apostle' did not evangelize in a vacuum but in the Roman Empire, an already 'well-oiled' machine of government and law. The communities he visited were already part of the 'body politic' in their region, whether they be a 'polis'- a city-state or part of a larger entity with representatives responsible to ensure fidelity to their heritage and values. Likewise they already had gathered assemblies (called 'ecclesia') with the duty of keeping order and maintaining fidelity toward the Roman Empire and their 'Lord and Savior', that is, the reigning emperor, be it Tiberius, Claudius or Nero.

So the apostle was actually all about reorganizing society around a new understanding of 'ecclesia', what we call 'church'. This was both revolutionary (one reason he was persecuted, jailed, beaten and ostracized), and utterly radical in its composition. Rather than being limited to the male landowners and elites of the community as tradition ordered, Paul proclaimed that this fellowship was radically inclusive, bringing all those who looked to Jesus of Nazareth as Lord and Savior under one roof. Male and female, slave and free, Greek, Roman, Jew, of whatever ethnicity (Celt, Slav or African), citizen or non-citizen, native or foreigner, all were included in this new body of the church.

By its very existence this 'church' was a political body, called into creation by a love and loyalty that went beyond the limits of the Roman Republic. The earliest church was counter-cultural not by choice, but by calling. This is what 'holiness' means to Paul. In the same way that he did not 'choose' to have been visited by Jesus on the Road to Damascus, so also did Paul not explicitly 'choose' the membership of these new gatherings to whom he was called to preach.

What was conceived in the mind of God was being worked out in the day-to-day ministry of Paul's journeys, visits and letters. Out of the disputes, problems and entanglements he deals with (not so unlike those daily issues that Jesus had to deal with as well), emerges an understanding and conviction that instructs and guides Paul further along in his work. It was a process that he calls 'being saved.' There are at least three parts to this process.

"Being saved" is more than just a one-time thing and is an ongoing process in living out the truth of the calling received.

"Being saved" does not come from us; it comes from God. (Ever so reminiscent of one of the famous 'Principles of Presbyterian Government' (1788); that "God alone is Lord of the Conscience.")



"Being saved" is a joy to be shared and passed along. It is not a solitary event (just as Paul always teamed with another, be it Timothy, Titus, Barnabas, John Mark, or Silas), but is always a common adventure.

Before we get to the nature of this 'treasure', there is also another dimension to Paul's work; one often forgotten and dismissed in discussions about the Apostle. It has to do with his resolute work in seeking financial contributions for the church in Jerusalem. This is of particular note in Paul's Corinthian correspondence (perhaps because of the relative wealth of this community?)

The fledgling Christian community in Jerusalem were suffering at the hands of the Romans. They were poor, and not just in Spirit, with few material resources to draw on. Those who chose to remain in the city were near starvation.

It's been said that collections have been taking place as long as there has been Christian worship, and that's pretty much true. This all goes back to Paul's meeting with the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, in 48AD, with Peter, James and John (he refers to them as 'the Pillars') (Gal.2:9).

Despite Paul's stellar credibility he had his share of difficulties in raising money. This can be seen in numerous passages in his Corinthian correspondence. Some questioned the real poverty of those in Jerusalem, others questioned if Paul could be trusted to deliver the funds. In

any case, Paul was persistent in his requests and understood financial contributions to be integral to the ongoing work of the good news shared by Jesus in the first place. Importantly, Paul saw that this offering to those in Jerusalem was to come from all, both Gentile and Jewish believers alike, as a sign of solidarity and sacrifice to those in need.

In other words, Paul was shaping the message of the Gospel to the situation at hand; "loving your neighbor as yourself." Paul clearly had a way with words. He then crafts a phrase that 'gives legs' to what needs doing to help visualize the gift of God we are given and what that means for others.

"We have this treasure in clay jars." It's a great phrase, isn't it?

What's the treasure? He lets us answer it...(surely it has to do with the imperishable love given us in Christ.)

Why clay jars? (it surely has to do with the very vulnerable flesh and blood bodies we are given to live in.)



The key to this phrase is how well we can all relate to it. We all have a treasure in life, memories, hopes, dreams, friends, family; and we all know too well the limits of the 'clay jars' we live in, with our aches and pains, breaks and breakdowns and more. Life is fragile and precious, and we all share in that.

And you know what the most important word is in this phrase coined by Paul? Without a doubt, (in my mind, at least), it is the simple word 'we'. Without 'we,' none of us is included. Without 'we' these are just words on a page, ineffable ideas, Platonic, idealized and disembodied.

Why link the notion of treasure with common and easily broken vessels? So that it is clear that this wealth of riches - this "hyperbole" of power comes from God and not from us. Fragility enhances the treasure. Fragility is very real.

I have to tell you that it's been more than once, while visiting an elderly church member in a nursing home, someone advanced in age or illness, when I've been asked, "Why am I still alive"? (It's always an incredibly touching moment.) My answer has consistently been to the

effect that “you are part of Christ’s body, the church... we are always praying for you, and part of your job now is to keep praying for us.”

I really believe that is true... that when we are at our most fragile it helps to get beyond ourselves and to know that we are part of something bigger, longer lasting, and even holy. We are holy not by who we are ourselves, but by who calls us to be together. This is why we gather; this is why we pray, this is why we share of what we have for God’s work for those in need.

Even today, when I see the bread broken and the cup poured out at this table, on this Communion Sunday, I remember that there are gifts that are beyond words and that right here on earth we are invited to participate in the drama that is part of the reconciling life and death of Christ. This is the mystery at the heart of the Christian faith, it is the heart of the matter. Our conviction is that God is at work repairing the world; even through us. The power behind it all is God, who makes light to shine in the dark places and dares to place treasure in earthen vessels, even in us. Amen.