

July 19, 2020

Text: 2 Corinthians 4:1-18. 'Treasure in clay jars'

Friends in Christ,

"Nova Scotia strong" flags are fading in the summer sun, but the need to be strong with kindness is not fading away, even as we are enjoying summer days. Its a summer like no other, with graciously good weather so far, but without the streams of visitors we are used to. Including those who would come to our own homes. Can you understand when I say that the very essence of our house for me is to give space for friends and summer visitors, and that I miss them so much? I bet you can. Yes, we need to push ourselves to be strong on those days that its hard to get up or find focus. It takes much more energy than usual to organize the day so one has a somewhat satisfied feeling at the end of it. It takes intention to say to yourself "you are worth it, having a good day. What will it take? What might make you feel better about yourself?" I have many beautiful people in my life who are experiencing depression which now is intensified by Covid. This is not even mentioning those who have loved ones in hospital and cant visit them as often as they would like to, sometimes not at all.

This is also not mentioning the sadness that comes with losses related to our ageing, that inevitable loss of friends, parents and siblings. Nor is it mentioning the physical ailments of our ageing bodies.

In all this we do try to be strong, and to some extent we must: for our children, for our grandchildren, perhaps for partners. For ourselves because we dont want to give up. For God, who loves us as a mother loves her child. We tell ourselves "we've got this"- an expression the young people in the United Church taught us "oldies" at the last conference before the big restructuring. We've got this - in Nova Scotia, we've done it right, and the sacrifices of all have indeed made a big difference in keeping the Covid numbers down.

I am happy to share some more words with you this day- words which are more than self motivated pep talk.

We don't often hear words that name the reality of our situation without embellishing the situation and then inspire courage and hope at the same time. Such words are precious. Such understanding is rare. Such understanding is life giving.

The apostle Paul shares such words with us today:

"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed."

Paul is familiar with how fragile our bodies and minds can be. He has years rich in deprivation, stress and illness behind him.

But these hardships have meaning for him. We walk with Jesus, who was "familiar with grief", and yet did countless good for countless people.

“always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. 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.”

Are we “Jack in a box” characters? Are we people who, when put down, are so resilient we simply rebound, again and again? No, that’s not what he means here.

The Easter life of Jesus can not be seen in supermen and women.

What Paul offers is something radically different from the celebrity mold: We take the life of Jesus as pattern for our own life. Although called “son of God” he was one of us and even one of the poorest. He suffered from disappointments and loss, he was afraid, and he could even get angry. In this humanity he lived the highest potential for trust in God, change making, and helping others. He died for it, yet he lives.

This means that we must expect that in our common humanity, and especially in our caring for the world there will be disappointment, suffering, grief, illness and death.

But as we are connected with Christ, who is risen, Easter light shines through us.

When I understand that the “negative” in my life is not a punishment or failure, but part of being human, part of being Christ like, then perhaps I understand also how the resurrection life of Christ may shine through me. He gives the strength of love to smile despite the pain, to say something kind even though feel incredibly grumpy, do something hopeful when I am tempted to give up.

We are able, Paul says, to be completely honest about our human frailty and condition. We do not need the embellishment of our story and the cosmetic surgery on the outside because of what we carry inside of us, that is light. The life of Christ, living, dying, rising – all out of love.

Anthem, by Leonard Cohen:

The birds they sang
At the break of day
Start again
I heard them say
Don't dwell on what
Has passed away
Or what is yet to be
Yeah the wars they will
Be fought again
The holy dove
She will be caught again
Bought and sold
And bought again
The dove is never free
Ring the bells (ring the bells) that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack in everything (there is a crack in everything)
That's how the light gets in

Did Cohen think of this NT passage when he was writing this song? Probably not. But- we Christians are pottery, says Paul, with cracks in them! Not superstars, only deeply human.

Pottery jars in antiquity were used for everything. They were the drawers and containers everything went in for storage. You had small ones, medium and huge ones. Really they came in all sizes. Fancily decorated ones and the normal every day use ceramics. Archeologists have said that people did not always store their valuables in the fancily glazed pottery jars. It could be smarter to keep your treasures in a very ordinary looking jar where it blended in with the salt and the flower jars.

“We have this treasure in clay jars” says Paul - “so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us”

When we radiate light despite our fragile condition, it becomes clear who the source of the light is who merges with us: To God be the glory.

Perhaps some of you remember one of the memorial services that was held after the mass shooting. The United Church minister was a colleague of mine, shortly before retirement. She has a speech impediment and I remember this powerful prayer she led. She had to take her time to say every word, she was bent over, but the words she offered were so real and full of compassion, they touched me more than those offered by other people without her difficulties. God's love and broken heart shone brightly through her.

I have similarly met several younger people who love being with the elderly, especially those elderly who have a heart of gold. Something is transmitted through their frailty and gentleness that we do not find in the slick and empty faces of the beauties who we see daily in advertisements.

Local artist Geoff Butlers latest book features paintings and rhyme as :“Lullabies for seniors”. All the bodies are somewhat damaged, seem slightly broken, or depicted as at least heavily wrinkled and used, but the scenes radiate gentle humour and peace.

When Geoff spoke at the packed King's theatre about the creative process that went into the making of the book, you could have heard a needle drop. Everyone sensed the spiritual power and deep humanity of this unassuming man.

So if we get stuck on someone's outside, we will so often miss the essential “treasure” that is within this “clay jar”. Likewise, when we expect of ourselves to be “crackless” we waste time and opportunity for ministering to others in the deep way that can only come when we are in touch with our own vulnerability.

And ministry is what this is all about. We have a vocation, all of us as Christians, (not just the “minister”) to serve one another kindly with the gifts we have been given.

If we get hung up on how we look or how well or bad we speak we will not rejoice in the “treasure that is within ourselves”. As people who try to walk the path of Christ, we have a ministry that does not end until we take our last breath.

And then we trust with Paul that Divine Love will minister to us in a way that reveals God;s glory more fully than we can comprehend now. “So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.”

One of the hymns you may have come across both in the green “Songs for a gospel people” and in “Voices United” is based on today’s scripture passage:

We have this ministry, and we are not discouraged -it is by God’s own pow’r that we may live and serve. Openly we share God’s word, speaking truth as we believe, praying that the shadowed world may healing light receive....Voices United # 510, words by Jim Strathdee

We’ve got this.

So, embrace your ministry, while here in this uncomfortable pandemic and in these dangerous times

no matter where you are and how old you are.,

Embrace your ministry, and do not be discouraged.

We are in this together, each with the gifts we have been given. “Small, medium, large” - gifts of word or deed, of action or contemplation, gifts that are as unique as you are!

Would you like to join in saying the words of the “New Creed” which describe our common ministry?

We trust in God.

We are called to be the Church:

- to celebrate God’s presence,
- to live with respect in Creation,
- to love and serve others,
- to seek justice and resist evil,
- to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death,

God is with us.

We are not alone.

Structure:

pressure to be strong

Its good to read honest talk-- acknowledge we are fragile

but - we have a ministry as "cracked" people together

embrace your ministry