**Treasure in Clay Jars**

Sermon for June 2, 2024 The Rev. David Griswold 2 Corinthians 4: 1, 5-12

*Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart…But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it might be made clear that this power belongs to God and not us…* (2 Cor 4:1, 5)*.*

From today’s first reading, these are the words of an anxious pastor to a congregation in a time of challenge. Paul reminds Christians in Corinth that their ministry—to make known the reconciling love of Jesus-- draws its energy and purpose entirely from God. As long as we remember we are God’s people doing God’s work, Paul says, our challenges and shortcomings won’t overwhelm us.

His core teaching is that Christ is the face of God, and we, the faithful, are Christ’s body in the world. God has put light into our hearts, Paul says, to reveal “the glory of God in the face of Christ” (4: 6). Paul knows that the work of revealing Christ’s love in a troubled world is arduous and risky.But, he suggests, no matter how small, fearful and unreliable we may think we are to undertake this ministry, it is more about how large, faithful and steadfast God is.

What did Paul’s message mean to the church in first-century Corinth? What did it mean to churches in twentieth century Birmingham, Alabama? What might it mean to churches in twenty-first century Washington, DC? Let’s travel a bit.

First to Corinth. Although this thriving Grecian city is not fertile ground for the Jesus movement, Paul plants a congregation there—a tiny minority of Christians in surroundings that could be hostile to them.

For Paul, the reality of the risen Christ amounts to a “new creation”-- not merely a new story to tell, but the basis for a new way of living: Jesus is Lord, and in Christ, all are one; human categories of rank and status don’t matter to God. The most important quality for us to cultivate is the capacity to love.

But after Paul leaves Corinth, rival teachers disparage him, casting doubt on his leadership. They practice a more refined and dramatic style of oratory. They criticize Paul as a weak and unappealing messenger who tends to alienate others and dwells too much on suffering—both his own and that of Jesus on the cross.

Fearing that this fledgling community is about to lose heart for its mission, Paul writes to defend himself with a simple metaphor. The ministry entrusted to God’s people is treasure that we have “in clay jars” (4: 7). We carry this most precious of all gifts in flimsy earthenware vessels, as cheap and disposable in Paul’s day as a plastic bag or, here at St. Columba’s, a compostable coffee cup might be today!

By “clay jars” Paul intends that the gospel is carried in the world by fallible humans—revealed in our tentatively faithful yet imperfect, easily cracked lives. But unlike clay jars, our faith strengthens us to transform the world, even when faced with seemingly insurmountable challenges.

Thus, as Paul says, we are “afflicted in every way but notcrushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed” (4: 8-9). With their confidence in Paul restored, the Corinthians continue to champion the gospel without losing heart.

Christians down the centuries have drawn inspiration from Paul, but our still-evolving church has not always agreed on how to recognize the face of Christ or who is worthy of Jesus’ unconditional love. In mid-twentieth-century Birmingham we saw the church in danger of losing its bearings just as it was in Corinth.

The recent parish pilgrimage to Alabama highlighted how America’s struggle for racial justice has been linked to the divergent ways people of faith discern the purposes of God. Predominantly white churches, in their caution, indifference and even opposition to the cause of civil rights, seemed to be looking away from the gaze of Christ--ready to ration Jesus’ love and thus limit the reach of God’s justice.

Predominantly black churches, despite the risks and hardships, recognized in the face of Christ the promise of love and freedom being denied in a culture built on white supremacy. They became incubators of God’s liberating energy and a force for change. Our pilgrimage brought us into sacred spaces that sustained African Americans in their faith in the midst of the dehumanizing way of life imposed by segregation.

I felt enormously grateful to visit these spaces—as well as humbled, shamed and challenged. Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, and Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and Bethel Baptist in Birmingham, remain living memorials to faithful witnesses whose sufferings, sacrifices and long-festering frustrations led to courageous activism.

The Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, pastor at Bethel, is remembered as indispensable to the racial justice movement. It was he who persuaded Dr. King to come to Birmingham to make a stand in the city known then as the “most racist in America.” Reverend Shuttlesworth had several key qualities in common with the apostle Paul. Like Paul, he was passionately committed to joining the reconciling work of Jesus. Like Paul, despite his brilliance, his manner could seem abrasive and off-putting to some people.

And like Paul, he was ready to risk his safety in order to carry the ministry forward. Outside Bethel Baptist, markers show the location of bombs that exploded on three occasions including one on Christmas night 1956 that struck the church and parsonage while the pastor and his family were home. They all survived.

In the mission for God’s justice, Rev. Shuttlesworth and his supporters surely harbored fears, doubts and an awareness of their limitations as “clay jars.” I expect Paul’s testimony of having been “afflicted…but notcrushed…perplexed but not despairing, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed” (4: 8-9) inspired them not to lose heart when faced with water cannons, attack dogs and bombs.

But eight prominent white clergymen including two Episcopal bishops did lose heart when given the chance to stand up as and for God’s people during the Birmingham campaign in 1963. They sent an open letter to Dr. King urging an end to the “unwise and untimely” demonstrations against segregation.

In his withering reply from jail, Dr. King expresses sorrow and anger at the “white church and its leadership…(who have been) more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows.”\*

Today I, perhaps like many of you, can shake my head in shame and bewilderment that those and other white leaders seemed to be guided by fear and expediency rather than by faith**.**  If I served in a southern church at that juncture, would I have been cautious or courageous? Would we here in Washington, given the chance, have pushed back against racist policies adopted decades ago whose effects continue to promote inequality in our city? Or would we lose heart?

We know from studying parish history that our forbears did lose heart, seeming to place short term needs above the larger purposes of God. We stood by when African American neighbors in nearby Fort Reno were displaced by development. We even pocketed funds that should rightly have gone to the Black congregation of our mission church, St. George’s, when their land was confiscated.

St. Columba’s has come to flourish in a vibrant neighborhood that doesn’t just happen to be predominantly white, but was designed to be that way as part of the nation-wide practice of red-lining. One writer calls this “a housing footprint that fossilized our communities into skin-color coded haves and have nots.”+ This and other ongoing disparities that flow from the sin of racism continue to weigh on our country. And there remain a host of other seemingly insurmountable challenges in the world to keep us up at night.

As we celebrate the blessings of 150 years of ministry, we may not always be confident that the “new creation” Paul envisioned can be realized in our midst. Yet his call remains compelling: we are connected to a power source in God that far exceeds the level of energy, courage, and resolve we might think our individual clay jars contain.

We feel this in the warmth and open-heartedness of the people of this community. We see it in the growth of our ministries of hospitality and compassion and in our advocacy for change.

If St. Columba’s like other churches once “remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows,” we are today a force for greater awareness and action to advance God’s justice. Our church is sponsoring the Undesign the Redline exhibit which we’re invited to tour together this afternoon. We’re pressing for the expansion of affordable housing opportunities here in Ward Three. We’re exploring how to utilize church property and resources to make ours a more diverse and inclusive neighborhood starting here on 42nd Street.

These won’t necessarily be easy undertakings. But as Paul tells us, we are God’s people and this is God’s work, so let us not lose heart.

Amen.

Works cited:

\*Jonathan Rieder, *Gospel of Freedom: Martin Luther King Jr.’s Letter from a Birmingham Jail and the Struggle that Changed a Nation* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing 2013) p. 181

+Debby Irving, *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race* (Cambridge, MA, Elephant Room Press, 2014) p. 34