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June 3, 2018

***Treasure in Clay Jars***  
***2 Corinthians 4:7-12***

*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.*

I think it helps to know the **context** of Paul's words here to the church at Corinth.

That church was full of different **factions**, different groups who were constantly **fighting**, and trying to assert their **authority** over the other groups.

Here Paul is trying to maintain his **spiritual authority** in that church, not by bragging on himself or saying 'I am right', but instead by claiming that he is **relying upon the strength of God** in his own weakness, and imperfection.

This **isn't the way our world works**, is it?

We usually see people trying to prove that they are right, by **asserting their own authority**, intellect, fame, fortune, or power. Paul does something almost opposite, claiming that **in his weakness he relies upon God's power**, not his own.

Elsewhere Paul talks about how God uses the **foolish and weak** to show God's strength and power to the supposedly strong or wise.

In 1 Corinthians 1:27-30 Paul says:

*But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no one <sup>30</sup> might boast in the presence of God.*

<sup>30</sup> *He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus,*

This is why Paul is talking about ***a treasure in clay jars***.  
 Sounds odd to the modern ear,  
 because we don't store things in clay jars today,  
 but back then they did—and those kind of jars were very ***utilitarian, easily broken, and often imperfect***.  
 A clay jar is like us.  
 We are ***fragile, imperfect, often broken***—  
 but in our fragile lives we hold the glory of God,  
 and the good news of Jesus Christ, is in our imperfect hearts.

These are Paul's words of ***encouragement***  
 to a church embroiled in conflict and controversy,  
 and our words of encouragement,  
 when we face hard times.

Listen to these words again—and tell me ***what you hear*** in them:  
*.<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*

What do you hear?  
 Do any of you hear ***hope***?  
 It's interesting, when we did Lectio Divina on this passage at our Session meeting Tuesday night, that's what almost everyone heard—hope.

That's what Paul is counting on—  
 that we can not only ***survive*** the tough times,  
 we can even ***thrive*** during them—because of ***God's power*** in our hearts.  
 J.B. Phillips in his translation of these verses says  
*"We get knocked down, but not knocked out".*

Eugene Peterson, in The Message translation of the Bible says:  
*we've been thrown down, but we haven't broken.*

***We all know hard times today,***  
 We are no strangers to conflict, right?

It happens at work, at school, in churches, and in our homes.  
 And somehow in those times of conflict,  
***God's power can bring new life, and hope!***

I was reading about ***Father Elias Chacour***,  
 a Palestinian Christian priest in Israel.  
 He lives as a refugee—evicted with other Palestinians from his land.  
 But his faith in Jesus Christ has not only sustained him,  
 it has given him courage and strength  
 to face the continual challenges of ministry.

Something happened in his church on a Palm Sunday  
 that completely ***changed*** him forever.  
 As he started to lead the service,  
 he looked out and saw ***division and conflict***.  
 There were two sisters in the church who had not spoken in years.  
 Many were neighbors who constantly fought.  
 Most of the members hated the local policeman in the congregation.

Father Chacour felt the ***Holy Spirit nudging him*** to take action.  
 So he walked down the aisle of the church,  
 went to the front door, locked it, and returned to the pulpit.  
 Then he said, *'the doors of the church are locked'*  
*"Either you kill each other right here, or you use this opportunity to be  
 reconciled. If this reconciliation happens, Christ will truly become our Lord"*

Everyone was silent.  
 No one spoke.  
 No one moved.  
 After what seemed like hours,  
 the policemen walked to the center aisle and ***asked for forgiveness***.  
 He cried as he approached Father Chacour and hugged him.  
 As he hugged the priest, Father Chacour said, *"I will **hug** everyone and  
 everybody will hug each other"*.  
 And that's what happened.  
 Slowly but surely, the sisters made amends.  
 People let down their guard and reached out in love to one another.  
 The whole church was overcome by a spirit of reconciliation, love and peace.  
 The congregation vowed to never shut its doors.

Today that church has built schools for Christian, Jew, and Muslim students and they have served over 3,000 children and youth in Israel. Elias Chacour with Mary E. Jensen, *We Belong to the Land* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999) 121-145.

Our Lord Jesus Christ,  
Is the treasure in our hearts—  
and the Lord of reconciliation, grace, and peace—  
***even in the midst*** of adversity,  
***Especially*** in the midst of adversity.

My daily devotional, *Streams in the Desert*, on June 2<sup>nd</sup> said this:  
*I will never forget the statement of that great man of faith,  
George Mueller once made to a gentleman who asked him  
the **best way to have strong faith.**  
He said, “the **only way** to have strong faith is to endure **great trials.**  
I have learned my faith through standing firm through severe testings.”  
How true this is! You must trust when all else fails...  
if you are enduring great afflictions right now,  
you are at the **source of the strongest faith.**  
God will teach you during those dark hours  
to have the most powerful bond to His throne you could ever know....” L.B.  
Cowman, *Streams in the Desert*, June 2<sup>nd</sup>.*

Our faith is ***not a guarantee of freedom*** from pain or affliction.  
Rather it is the guarantee of an ***opportunity***—  
the opportunity for our suffering to help us ***grow in faith and trust*** in God.  
The opportunity to be ***transformed*** by our suffering.  
Does this mean suffering ***always*** helps and transforms us?  
No. For some suffering is just brokenness.

But for those who see suffering as ***hopeful***,  
maybe not all the time,  
but maybe we see just a little ***ray of light*** from God—  
for those believers, suffering can be ***transformative***,  
a time of ***growing faith and the cultivation of perseverance.***

For the Roman Catholic church, ***fortitude*** is a cardinal virtue.  
Fortitude is that ability to ***persevere*** through the hardest times,  
***trusting in God’s power***, not our own.

It is believing that we **clay jars**  
 have the **treasure** in our brokenness,  
*so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary **power belongs to God***  
*and does not come from us.*

Our broken bodies contain the glory of God,  
 Our suffering contains **lessons of faith and love,**  
**Even hope**—if we have the heart to welcome that.

Paul does not mince words about this in 2 Corinthians 4:  
*<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.*

I was telling someone yesterday  
 about how from the time they were little I taught my kids  
 'life is not fair' and 'life is hard'.  
 I didn't want them to think that life was easy,  
 or even that if you do what's right life is fair or comfortable.  
 Because it's not.

And I didn't want them to think that **their actions caused** suffering,  
 and their goodness caused blessing,  
 because life doesn't always work that way, right?  
 There is **not a formula for blessing,**  
 if there were, we'd all be sitting pretty, right?

There is **not a formula for suffering** either.  
 Sometimes our bad actions have consequences,  
 other times we suffer the consequences of other people's actions,  
 or just the consequences of living in a broken, fallen world,  
 awaiting the redemption of Jesus.  
 Often we suffer and we've done absolutely nothing to deserve it!

There is **no formula for making it through this life without suffering.**  
 People who claim that there is one--are charlatans.

What there is,  
 is a **promise** that **God is with us,**  
 no matter how we suffer,

It's like Isaiah 43 says:

*When you walk through the waters and fires of life, I will be with you.*

God does not promise to keep the waters and fires away,

God promises to **walk with us**, right **through** them.

And no matter how we suffer,

We believe that **God CAN bring**

**transformation, reconciliation, peace, and hope—**

no matter what comes our way.

Sometimes **we get to see** this before our very eyes,

like Father Chacour in Israel,

in his congregation that Palm Sunday.

Other times, **we wait years, or even a lifetime**,

and like Moses we see the promised land from afar,

but it is the next generation who will enter it.

Regardless of what happens in our suffering,

We have the **promises of God at all times and places**.

We are clay jars, fragile and imperfect.

But we hold a priceless treasure—the glory of God.

We have the **gift of God's grace**—the Good News of the Gospel.

No one can take this away from us.

It is our **priceless treasure forever!**

And the **suffering** we walk through—it CAN bring **blessing**.

The **trials** we endure—they CAN make us **stronger**.

The **fears** we face—CAN bring us **courage**.

And the **foes** we forgive—CAN bring about **reconciliation**.

In college I wrote a thesis as a Religion major at the University of Tulsa,

and it was on the life, writings, and theology of a French mystic,

a young woman named **Simone Weil**.

Weil was a passionate young woman

who had an amazing faith in God after her conversion to Christianity.

She lived in **solidarity** with those who were suffering,

and she wrote extensively about the power of **affliction**.

She volunteered in the Spanish Civil War despite her own poor health. Throughout her life she **wrestled with the meaning of pain**.

In her book, *Waiting for God*, she writes about finding new courage from a story about **apprentices**. “When an apprentice gets hurt or complains of being tired, the workmen and peasants have this expression: **‘It is the trade entering his body’**.” Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), 131-32. Similarly, she said, when we face pain, it is God and God’s Word entering our bodies.

I find that to be really **profound**.

Rev. Mark Barger Elliott writes that our faith in Jesus Christ does not mean freedom from adversity, but “*rather that such adversity will **grant us the opportunity to discover and come to trust that by God’s grace, light is always brighter than darkness, life stronger than death, and what resides inside our broken, apprenticed bodies is the glory of a resurrection waiting to burst forth***”. Mark Barger Elliott, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol 3, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), pg. 91

In a book called ***River Teeth***, David James Duncan writes about how when a tree breaks and falls into a river, that it’s afterlife is in many ways, of more benefit than the original life of the tree—because it ‘*creates a vast transfusion of nutrients....a river feast*’. Eventually, immersed trees break down and look like rocks. These rocks Duncan refers to as ‘**river teeth**’.

How true that is in our lives. Sometimes our own **brokenness** brings life and light to us, and to those around us. Sometimes our brokenness **can bring life we didn’t even know we had**.

Kind of like seeing **Stephanie** walk faithfully through her cancer treatment—she is an inspiration, isn’t she? Her brokenness brings life to so many,

probably more than she will ever know.

**Patti and Betty** have given us similar inspiration,  
as have so many of you,  
when you walk courageously through the trials and tribulations  
of this broken journey of faith.

Friends, the **Good News** is really incredible today.  
We are fragile clay jars holding a priceless treasure—  
the grace and goodness of God.

**In our weakness, God is strong,**  
And in our brokenness, God can bring **life and light.**  
May we **open our hearts** to this truth,  
and carry the glory of God to all those around us.  
And to that, all God's people said, Amen!