

Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 3, 2018
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

2 Corinthians 4:5-12 For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. 8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. 10 We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. 11 For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. 12 So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

Glorious Gospel Identity: Valuable Container

School might be out already. Memorial Day might be in the rear view mirror. But we will know when summer has really arrived when you step outside and that wave of heat just hits you. That summer, real summer, will stick around for a few months. So you can't exactly hibernate and retreat into some subterranean cave. It just means when you go outside, you have to be prepared. So when you enjoy the picnics and BBQs and outdoor activities these summer months, you need to have the right coolers to take to the park or lake. I've been eyeing those double-walled, heavy-duty Hydro Flask that will keep ice intact even after you leave it in your car in a parking lot in direct sunlight for hours. Finding the right container is so important. There's value in finding the ones that work for you.

God wants you to think of yourself as a valuable container. You aren't made of plastic or aluminum or even steel. In fact, you probably feel like you look pretty ordinary or pretty plain. But in these verses from 2 Corinthians chapter four, we see God puts something very valuable inside you. What God calls you to carry around with you is very valuable. That actually makes you very valuable.

In this section of Scripture we get the Apostle Paul's own example. For years Paul had dedicated his life to sharing the good news of Jesus. He had given up his previous life so he could travel around from town to town teaching people about Jesus. And because of that life and the direction of his life, he was getting critics and haters. So when he writes to the church in Corinth: **"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us,"** he is talking about himself. (2 Corinthians 4:7) He is letting his fellow Christians know he feels less like the superstar MVP of missionaries and more like a fragile, weak earthenware vessel.

What I really admire about this section of Scripture, this glimpse into a letter sent to a group of Christians, is how Paul can be brutally honest about the grim realities of ministry while maintaining such a confident and upbeat attitude. He gives us a brief summary of the

dangers he faced: **“We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.”** (2 Corinthians 4:8,9) His ministry wasn’t always pleasant. His life often wasn’t easy. In fact, he says: **“We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus.”** (2 Corinthians 4:10) He faced constant threats. Constant exposure to danger and suffering and even death. And all of this came because of his connection to Jesus.

Here’s the part where I can be open and honest with you. First of all, I’m not the Apostle Paul. Secondly, I don’t act like Paul when I face negative reactions. And my guess is you are a lot like me. We face setbacks a lot less serious than being hard pressed or persecuted or knocked around. There is probably no one in this room who has suffered physical abuse for your Christian faith. Maybe we get some scornful looks or snide comments because of false impressions about Christians. More often it is just someone who isn’t interested in learning more about Christianity. Or a fellow Christian who lets you down and disappoints you. Someone who isn’t as active or enthusiastic about their faith. Sometimes all it takes to shatter our ego is a negative impression, a bad vibe from someone else. Actually, that’s probably the biggest culprit. We tell ourselves that being a servant of the gospel is just not worth our time and effort because of what other people will probably say or how they might react.

We suffer from a lack of confidence. In a sense we can think of it as spiritual low self-esteem. Here’s one definition: "Low self-esteem is a thinking disorder in which an individual views him/herself as inadequate, unlovable, and/or incompetent. Once formed, this negative view permeates every thought, producing faulty assumptions and ongoing self-defeating behavior.

Paul’s gospel focus and personal ministry experiences.”¹ That same article goes on to give examples of how low self-esteem displays itself in the lives of teenagers: “75% of girls with low self-esteem reported engaging in negative activities like cutting, bullying, smoking, drinking, or disordered eating.” Teenage boys aren’t immune from using all kinds of supplements and even steroids because of their low view of their own bodies.

Not all of us are teenagers. But we all feel weak and discouraged at times. We give up too easily. We walk away from our Christian callings. Jars of clay, sure. Fragile and breakable. But housing something valuable and important? It sure doesn’t feel like it.

But the Apostle Paul doesn’t give us this realistic and honest picture of Christian ministry so we will walk away. This weakness of who we are serves an important purpose. How fragile and vulnerable we are just serves to highlight how amazing God’s power really is. He says: **“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.”** (2 Corinthians 4:7) He is talking about the power of God’s glory that shows us Jesus Christ.

So often we don’t feel that power, we don’t see it on display, because our fragile nature causes us to react in the exact opposite way God wants us to. Sensing rejection, feeling

¹ <https://www.dosomething.org/us/facts/11-facts-about-teens-and-self-esteem>

picked on, hearing opposition, being unsuccessful in our minds all make us feel weak. In weakness we focus almost exclusively on ourselves, instead of seeing God's power. C.S. Lewis explains it this way: "The natural life in each of us is something self-centered, something that wants to be petted and admired, to take advantage of other lives, to exploit the whole universe. And especially it wants to be left to itself: to keep well away from anything better or stronger or higher than it, anything that might make it feel small. It is afraid of the light and air of the spiritual world, just as people who have been brought up to be dirty are afraid of a bath."² Maybe we aren't thinking too highly of ourselves. We are just thinking of ourselves too much.

The Apostle Paul was able to use his own life and see God's results in his weakness. He says: **"We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you."** (2 Corinthians 4:10-12) When he felt weak, God was at work. When he experienced setbacks, God was working success. When he was seeing threats and danger, God was accomplishing victory.

Now here is the point where you might point out how different you are from Paul. When he was writing about his personal experiences, he was talking about himself and his ministry partners. So the closest equivalent today is probably people like pastors and missionaries and full-time church workers. And yet he was writing to average people sitting in the congregation in Corinth. That's all of us, not just professional preachers and pastors.

Recently another outbreak of Ebola has made the news. This might sound familiar since there was a major outbreak of Ebola in West Africa between 2013 and 2016. That made researchers get to work on producing an effective vaccine to combat the deadly disease. Out of the dozen or so possibilities one seems to be the most promising. So they approved a stockpile of 300,000 doses ready in case there was another outbreak. There's one catch. Many vaccines have to be kept at temperatures much lower than room temperature. But this particular vaccine, the one that shows the most promise to combat Ebola needs to be stored between 76 and 112 degrees below zero. Now, I've never been to Western Africa, but I imagine that kind of temperature range is hard to keep in the middle of a tropical location.

The urgency of this situation led to innovation. The Arktek was developed as a double-walled vessel with near-vacuum in between, held together with reinforced fiberglass.³ Liquid nitrogen is sometimes used for those extreme industrial uses. But that won't keep the vaccine cold enough. Dry ice wasn't an option. Researchers discovered a rare synthetic alcohol that could be frozen and used in the rugged jungle reaches of West Africa. To you and me the Arktek cooler might look like a weird thermos. But the plastic, reinforced

² C.S. Lewis. *Mere Christianity*, p. 178.

³ <https://www.wired.com/story/the-wild-logistical-ride-of-the-ebola-vaccines-high-tech-thermos/>

fiberglass and frozen alcohol become very valuable when they hold the vaccine that could save lives, possibly thousands of lives.

You and I are like those funny-looking coolers. We share something very important with the Apostle Paul: **“For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.”** (2 Corinthians 4:5,6) We have Jesus Christ. We have his light shining in our hearts. It is the vaccine of grace for people so focused on themselves.

The light of the knowledge of God’s glory comes to us in an odd way. We might feel pressed in on every side, but Jesus was actually crushed by Romans soldiers. We might be perplexed all the time, but Jesus experienced agony in his passion. We might face persecution, but Jesus was really abandoned on the cross as he felt the punishment of hell for our wrongs. We might get knocked down, but Jesus was actually destroyed at the crucifixion. And here’s the mind-boggling part. It was in that weakness of Jesus, the moments when he seemed most fragile, that real victory was accomplished. Because of his suffering and death and victorious resurrection we can preach Jesus is Lord and master. He’s not just our Lord, but the Lord of everyone who needs his cure for everyone who struggles with the consequences of the natural selfishness that comes with being human.

Who you are doesn’t matter as much as what you have because of Christ. You have the cure from Christ that can’t be bought or produced any other way. You have the light of Christ in your heart. You have the glory of God radiating in your life. You don’t have to look for your value in who you are but instead what Christ has given you. Your worth isn’t wrapped up in the way you want people to see you, but in the powerful cure given you. God’s true value is found in you. God values you enough to give you the privilege of carrying Christ.

That is the challenge for every Christian. When you go to a picnic and enjoy delicious food, you don’t complement the cooler. But it wouldn’t have been possible without it. When you have spent the entire day out in the hot sun and get a cool drink of refreshing water, you don’t marvel at the water bottle. You appreciate the thirst-quenching beverage it gave you. You are that container that delivers Jesus. When we are weak, we are strong with the life that Jesus gives. Our challenge is that people would pay as little attention to us as possible. Instead, we pray they could gaze attentively on Christ. That’s what makes us valuable containers. Amen.