

## **“It’s What’s Inside That Counts”**

“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.”

The people of Jerusalem Lutheran Church showed great kindness to me during the four years that I worshipped in this congregation while in university. They invited me to join the choir, teach Sunday school, and read the lessons in worship. Families would often invite me to their homes for Sunday dinner, knowing that the food in our campus dining hall was not exactly “home cooking.” On one occasion, a family in the church invited me to what they promised was a wonderful restaurant; only their invitation came with a word of caution: “Don’t let outward appearances fool you; it’s what’s inside that counts.” It was good that they gave me this warning, because when we pulled up to Mack and Mabel’s Restaurant, I might have thought that the place was abandoned. The restaurant was located in an old farmhouse that had seen better days; the building needed a coat of paint, some of the shutters were missing a few screws, and the roof looked like it would not survive the next rainstorm. The inside of the restaurant might also give a new patron pause; it was a series of small, dark rooms, and none of the furniture or table settings matched – it looked like they had furnished the restaurant by visiting a series of yard sales and buying anything and everything they saw. As we were seated, my hosts again reminded me that “it’s what’s inside that counts” – and that became evident when the food arrived. It was some of the most delicious food I had ever eaten, hearty Mennonite food that smelled great when it arrived at the table and tasted even better. I had not had such good food in a long time, and I probably ate like a condemned prisoner having his last meal. That wonderful meal in that unusual restaurant has always reminded me not to judge something or someone by outward appearances, but by what is inside the person or place; in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., we are to judge other people not by what we see but by “the content of their character.”

The people to whom Paul writes in today’s Second Lesson must have looked upon him as an unlikely person to bear the title “apostle.” The Corinthian Christians knew Paul well; he had lived among them for eighteen months and had written letters to them earlier to address some of the issues and challenges that were affecting the congregation and its witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. But as Greeks who had a

preconceived image of how a wise person should both look and act, Paul to some did not appear on the surface to be someone whose message should be heeded. As has often been noted, if all of the issues Paul addressed in his first letter had been settled, there would be no need for a second letter to the Corinthians; its mere existence is proof that not only do the problems addressed in the first letter still exist, but new problems have surfaced – including increasing criticism of the apostle himself and the validity of his apostolic ministry. Paul writes the second letter as a defense of his call to be an *“apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God”* (1:1) and to encourage the Corinthians to join him as *“ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”* (5:20). Paul addresses the criticism of his ministry, even showing how such harsh rebukes have been personally hurtful to him:

- “Now, even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not tearing you down, I will not be ashamed of it. I do not want to seem as though I am trying to frighten you with my letters. For they say, ‘His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.’ Let such people understand that what we say by letter when absent, we will also do when present.” – 10:8-11.

Paul uses his critics’ description of his appearance and speech to his advantage when he states that he and his associates *“do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake”* (4:5). Paul’s basis for defending himself is rooted in “God’s promises,” which are always for everyone (*“For in him every one of God’s promises is a ‘Yes.’”* – 1:20). The posture of servitude reflects Paul’s relationship to the Corinthians elsewhere and is meant to counteract any offence at Paul’s lofty claims (*“For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them.”* – 1 Corinthians 9:19). But it is not simply a rhetorical strategy for Paul to depict himself as a “slave” (*doulos*); it accords with his picture of Christ as one who *“emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness”* (Philippians 2:7). Paul’s calling as an apostle is as one who is called to be like the Son of Man who came *“not to be served but to serve, and to give himself as a ransom for all”* (Mark 10:45). As a “slave for Jesus’ sake,” Paul seeks to model his ministry after Christ who, as the “image/reflection” (*elkon*) of God, is the focus of the gospel that Paul proclaims. Like Christ, Paul takes the “form of a slave” in his relationship with the Corinthians.

- “In the Messiah, what we announce or commend when we present ourselves to others is not our personal or collective egos – our achievements, what makes us

special or important ... Rather, what we announce is that the Messiah is Lord and that announcement – if sincere – binds us to being slave of others for Jesus' sake.” – Lois Malcolm.

The source of what God's servants announce lies in God's speaking creation into being: *“For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”* (4:6). Glory is known by believers in Christ, whose face and presence reflect that glory like light. The redemptive light, comparable to God's calling forth “light out of darkness” at creation (Genesis 1:3), now shines forth in the coming of Christ, as was prophesied through Isaiah: *“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined”* (Isaiah 9:2). It is this proclamation of the *“light that shines in the darkness”* (John 1:5) that has been at the heart of Paul's preaching to the Corinthians from the start, *“giving us knowledge of the glory of God in ‘the face’ – the personal presence – of Jesus the Messiah in our lives.”* (Malcolm).

It is this priceless treasure of the good news of Jesus Christ that the apostolic church has been called to bear to others; but as one should not judge something or someone by outward appearances, neither should the gift that Paul and his associates bring to the Corinthians be judged by what they see in these servants of Christ: *“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”* (4:7). Such “earthen vessels” were cheap and fragile earthenware that was a metaphor for the vulnerability of mortal existence. Earthenware vessels were also used in priestly service of temple sacrifice and could be easily broken or contaminated (*“Any earthen vessel that the one with the discharge touches shall be broken; and every vessel of wood shall be rinsed in water.”* – Leviticus 15:12). As we buy products not for the packaging but for what is inside, what is of priceless worth is not the vessel that carries the treasure of the gospel of Jesus Christ, but the word of light and life that is borne to others so that it may be made clear that the treasure does not belong to the church but is from God: *“So grand a treasure borne in such a menial, inept container makes it unmistakable that the power enabling the whole enterprise is from God and not from us.”* (J. Paul Sampley).

Paul goes on to speak of the hardships that he and his companions have experienced in the course of their apostolic ministry, which he presents as proof that the work in which they engage is from God: *“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus*

*may also be made visible in our bodies.*” (4:8-10). It is the “power of God that has kept these difficulties from being overwhelming, so that Paul does not “lose heart” or “despair” (*“Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart”* – 4:1). Such “hardship lists” were a common feature of the Roman world of Paul’s time. Sages often employed such recounting of difficulties to show that they were imperturbable and not governed by externals. While Paul borrows this form from the society in which he lives, the difference is he does not use them to prove his superiority in triumphing over troubles by his own strength or virtue but that it is through God’s abiding presence that he is able to overcome such obstacles in his mission to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. As he proclaims in his letter to the Philippians, *“I can do all things through him who strengthens me”* (Philippians 4:13).

- “Paul does not depict these extreme hardships in order to highlight his own strength amid adversity ... Instead, his point is to stress that God’s ‘shining’ through us occurs precisely as we – like the Messiah and the righteous of old – rely solely on God’s promises of justice and mercy in spite of what may happen to us.” – Malcolm.

In his own body, Paul speaks of carrying the death of Jesus (symbolizing Paul’s sufferings and affliction as reflections of Christ’s death), so that the life of Jesus (a reference to Christ’s resurrection, which is the basis of hope) may be shown forth. Paul’s missionary work, despite all his troubles and setbacks, is itself a witness to Christ’s resurrection because the continuation of his ministry in spite of all the obstacles he has encountered is evidence that the power indeed rests with God. He speaks of *“being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh”* (4:11) to describe the life of an apostle of Christ as being one of service to Jesus in conformity to the gospel. Both the death and the life of Jesus are seen in Paul’s body; it is also the means through which he proclaims that *“death is at work in us, but life in you”* (4:12).

- “‘Treasure in earthen vessels’ is a powerful double metaphor that recognizes the awesome trust God bestows upon each of us and at the same time honours our fragility as bearers of God’s grace and might. The image allows Paul and us to celebrate the awesome blessing of life and joy in tribulation, limitation, and difficulty. Because we are God’s chosen vessels, we do not need to build cathedrals or make pilgrimages, to engage in extraordinary actions to prove our faith. Instead, we simply need to live our lives each day in ways that love and honour one another.” – Sampley.

We who are called to be the “earthen vessels” that bear the extraordinary gift of the gospel of Jesus Christ know that the one who calls us to share this word of life was also not seen in a favourable light by others in his own life. Christ is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah who spoke of a Suffering Servant who was despised and rejected by those who did not see in his outward appearance the one who would fulfill God’s plan of salvation for all humanity:

- “For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.” – Isaiah 53:2-3.

In the prologue of his Gospel, John reminds his readers that Jesus was rejected by his own people who did not see in him the fulfillment of their hopes for a Messiah: *“He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him”* (John 1:11). When Philip invites his friend Nathaniel to come and see the one *“about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth,”* Nathaniel at first scoffs that the one who would fulfill the promise of the Messiah could come from such an unlikely place: *“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”* (John 1:45-46). Even Jesus’ own townspeople cannot believe that the Anointed One of God could be the same person who grew up in their midst, the son of a carpenter from down the street: *“All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’”* (Luke 4:22). But while Jesus’ outward or appearance or family background might not indicate his identity as the Messiah of God, those who could see beyond the surface would discover that *“to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God”* (John 1:12-13).

- “Here you learn what great glory is accomplished by the Son of God in his coming among those who receive him, have faith in him, and believe him to be the one sent by God to help the world. This is to be the new work and a new way, that he will give the power and the right to become children of God to them who believe in his name.” – Martin Luther.

As many people rejected Jesus because what they saw on the surface did not conform to their preconceived notions of a Messiah, so will those who are baptized in his name and called to bear his message to others be rejected by those who do not see in them the gospel of light and life. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul

acknowledges that many of his readers will experience similar rejection because others will refuse to see beyond their outward appearance to the message of hope that God has chosen to be borne to others through such humble vessels:

- “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 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; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us the wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’” – 1 Corinthians 1:26-31.

Paul’s message to the Corinthians in both of his letters is a challenge to the Christians in that city – and Christians of every time and place – to neither judge others by outward appearance nor to be concerned as to whether they are worthy to bear the message of God’s grace to others. We are all called in baptism to be “Christ bearers,” to share the life-changing message of the gospel of Jesus Christ with others, so that through this Word of grace and hope they too might know the love of God that is for them and for all people and might walk as children of the light. We may be fragile, but the Word we bear to others will last forever. We will not endure, but the Word of our Saviour will last forever. As I learned from my visit to Mack and Mabel’s, it’s not what’s on the outside that counts – it’s what’s on the inside that matters – the Word that transforms darkness into light and offers life that death can never overcome.

Amen.