

The Vessel and the Treasure  
Jan. 10, 2016  
Caldwell Presbyterian Church  
Rev. John Cleghorn  
Text: 2 Corinthians 4:5-7

We were blessed last Sunday by Steve Shoemaker's sermon, reminding us that out of immeasurable grace God pursues us in all things. That's a reassurance that never gets old or too familiar.

Steve hinted that he had a few thoughts about another topic - the state of our General Assembly. We will hold him to his promise to come share those thoughts at another time.

His reference reminded me of a good friend in ministry in Raleigh. Rev. Chris Edmonston is the senior pastor at White Memorial Presbyterian there. His large and influential congregation spans the breadth of the political spectrum. One member is Art Pope, the architect of the Republican strategy that has ruled the General Assembly in these last years. Another of Chris' flock is our state's Attorney General Roy Cooper, who is the presumed front runner for the state's Democratic nomination for Governor.

Art Pope on the right and Roy Cooper on the left. I haven't asked him if they actually sit on those sides of the sanctuary. Sometimes I think Caldwell is a tricky congregation .... I ask you to pray for Chris.

In addition to caring for his diverse flock, Chris is a leader in helping our national denomination think about transformation in these uncertain days for the organized church. A few months ago he made a point in an article that stuck with me. Reflecting on a lecture he heard, Chris posed two questions.

He said we often ask, "Does the church have a future?" Instead, should we be asking, "Does the future have a church?"

The difference between those questions is a big one. Are we to cling to old notions of church in these vastly uncharted and pluralistic times? Most, if not all, of us would quickly say, "No."

At the same time, we might ask: are we to impose our preconceived notions and ideas, whatever they may be, to shape what WE think the future of the church ought to be?

Do we have all the answers? Or are we to humble ourselves before the Holy Spirit. Are we to "let go and let God?"

I give thanks that so many of you are “letting go and letting God” when it comes to this particular church. You are letting God in the Holy Spirit guide us in our pursuit of our mission statement in how we bear witness to the gospel. As we are reminded time and time again, God is always doing a new thing.

That is a good word as we enter 2016. January is always a busy time. From the ushers who help in worship to the members who have brought our Buddy/Mentor ministry to at-risk kids to life; from how we care for each other in crisis to how we engage newcomers in the life of discipleship; from building relationship at Wednesday night suppers to marching in honor and commitment of Dr. Martin Luther King’s dream, all of our ministries are gearing up for the year.

Newly elected elders are training to be installed next month. Five out of 12 will be new this year. They bring new energy, new blood and new ideas to a team that has worked so extraordinarily hard.

In early February, you will be review a budget for the year. It will be an expression in dollars and cents of how we will activate this part of the body of Christ in 2016. This year brings all sorts of other exciting possibilities – a new Confirmation Class for our youth; finishing the transformation of the old Fellowship Hall space downstairs into a new community gathering spot; a deepening partnership with the newly arrived 24/7 Prayer Room in the Price Building, which brings new people to our campus every day; and, still newer campus partnerships in the works that will allow us to walk with and support some of the most marginalized populations in the city.

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As with any organization, this is always a good time to ask some big-picture questions: Why do we exist? What is most essential and important? What is God calling Caldwell in particular to do and to be? In the language of the secular world, we would ask: what is our “core business?”

In a very different time, those same questions were on the mind of the Apostle Paul as he wrote to the new church at Corinth. That was in the middle part of the first century. We know that correspondence as First and Second Corinthians. As with any congregation, that group was in dialogue about its mission and purpose and ways of being.

Paul’s relationship with the new Christians in Corinth was probably the most extensive of all of the churches he was associated with. As with any extended relationship, it had ups and downs. In today’s scripture, Paul takes time to point to what he believed was true and constant.

Just as we should let go and let God, Paul reminds the Corinthians of the true and final source of light in a murky and confused world. It isn't us and our wisdom, but God and God in Christ Jesus.

"For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves" as servants of Jesus, Paul writes.

"For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

That line packs a poetic punch, doesn't it?

"... the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

Isn't this the excellence and magnificence of the gospel, which we are all called to profess and live out?

"... the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

Then Paul gives us a memorable and tangible metaphor, one that reminds us to go about our task as the church with as much humility as we can muster. He writes.

"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."

"We have this treasure in clay jars ...."

Paul knew how to spin a metaphor that would stick. Earthen or clay jars would have been an every-day part of life for his readers and all first-century believers and seekers. It was as if he was referring to Tupperware. Think about it, who doesn't haven't Tupperware at home in the kitchen cabinet?

But unlike today's Tupperware, first-century earthen, clay jars were fragile. They were imperfect. There were not churned out at massive factories with precise quality controls to ensure that every jar or vase came off the line perfect, with a money back guarantee in case of breakage.

That's just the point. Clay jars break easily, especially those made with human hands. They aren't easy to make, as you may know if you've ever tried. Despite how long we may work a lump of clay with our hands, it forms and settles in uneven, unbalanced ways that hide air pockets and uneven sections. Then when they are fired, when they are exposed to extreme heat and duress, those weaknesses cause the pot or the jar to

crack and fall apart. That's to say nothing about our proclivity for chipping or dropping it, only to watch it shatter into pieces.

Yes, Paul knew that the treasure we are given to hold, the gospel of Christ Jesus for a needy and desperate world, is given into our imperfect hands. We have our own fault lines as disciples and, together, as the church. Cracks and soft spots, lumps and thin places. Yet, remarkably, God entrusts us with the treasure that is the best news the world will ever hear.

Remarkable, indeed, that we mere fools, we fragile, imperfect vessels, would be trusted in such a way with such an irreplaceable gift.

Paul's metaphor of the clay vessel doesn't stop there, about us as individuals trying to live out our faith. It goes on to inform our work together as a congregation. Each church, each congregation, is its own vessel, its particular expression to a hurting world of God's love and invitation into relationship.

To be sure, the vessel that is Caldwell is a bit different than other vessels that hold this treasure of the gospel. It is made up of many, many different kinds of clay – clay of differing tones and colors, clay of differing textures and differing origins, all held together with the bond of love that comes from God. That is the wonder of this place, what draws us here again and again. Yes, this earthen vessel stands out a bit from many others.

That's not by accident. In our mission statement, we proclaim our commitment to shaping a different kind of vessel. It's hard and often evasive work. But I, for one, tend to believe God kept this church open for that very purpose.

At the same time, it is all too easy, it seems to me, for us to focus too much on the vessel and lose sight of the treasure, which it exists to hold. It's easy to mistake the importance of the vessel for the value of the treasure, the gospel.

It is equally easy to lose sight of who the potter actually is. Ours is not to shape a vessel by quota or prescribed formulas, for that is not how our divine Potter-Creator works, is it? Ours is not to judge between this type of clay or that type of clay, clay of this color or that, of this make-up or that, prioritize one kind of clay over another.

I doubt the Holy Spirit is sitting around waiting for us to hand over a precise recipe for the mixture of clay that is to be this part of the body of Christ.

We are not to mistake the vessel for the treasure, the packaging for the content inside. That content is love, is gentleness, is mercy and forgiveness. It is our call to confession of our limited mortal wisdom and fragile and imperfect character. It is – or at least should be – to listen for the will of the One who is the master potter.

Here at Caldwell, God has given us - each and all of us - a precious gift, this multi-colored and varied earthen vessel, not that we should presume to have the final say of its shape, color, height, width and depth.

Whatever those parameters and design details may turn out to be, our call and our charge is to remember that our vessel will always be fragile and imperfect, whatever shape or color it may be. Our call should be to remember who the potter really is.

Most important, our call, as we move deeper into a new year of ministry, is to make our primary and abiding concern not the vessel ... but the treasure, the gospel of Christ's redeeming, loving, transformative power over a world that is so often lost. Nothing, nothing we do or say will ever exceed the power of that promise.

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Today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday, when we recall a day when even Christ Jesus, fully human, fully divine, surrendered his life and soul to the Godhead, Lord and Creator, a day he submitted himself for baptism. Stop and think for a moment. Why would Jesus, a fully grown adult with plenty of life experience, full knowledge of his divinity, think he needed baptism? He knew who he was, what he was capable of, that he could do what others never could, that he saw as others had never seen, that he had come into the world for divine purposes, that he would have influence in the world that the world had never seen, or ever would see again.

What did he need from baptism, especially a baptism by John, that outcast rebel who seemed to be nothing but trouble?

Jesus knew who he was, what he was capable of.

But he also knew *whose* he was, and that was far more important. That was the point. So, even with his infinite capacity, he walked into the river to meet John. And there he surrendered the rest of his days to serving God and God alone.

We hold this treasure in earthen vessel. How does dry clay become a vessel? Dry clay, common dirt, what most of us have beneath our homes here in the Carolinas, can become useful. But only when it is bonded together with water. Water that cleanses, water that seals, water that renews, water that transforms.

On this baptism of the Lord Sunday, let us come to the font, which is placed today in your midst. Let us come with the humility of Christ, humbling and submitting ourselves again to the God who knows our faults and failures and yet, in water, transforms us,

makes us whole, bond us together and makes us of use – not in our hands, but in God's divine hands.

Amen.