

## Reflection on the Word: June 3, 2018 2 Corinthians 4:5-12, Psalm 139

(with acknowledgement to sermon *Treasure Hidden in a Clay Jar* by King Duncan)

Following the death of their parents, in London, England, a brother and sister were cleaning out the family home and while doing so, they found an old vase. Thinking it might have some value, they took it to an auction house to sell it, and discovered it was from the 18<sup>th</sup> century Qing [cheeng] Dynasty and valued at nearly \$2 million. But, get this: after 30 minutes of spirited bidding at the auction, the vase went to a buyer from China for more than 69 million dollars, the most ever paid at auction for a Chinese antiquity. That brother and sister had no idea what kind of a treasure they had.

It's like another story about a couple in Wyoming who went to the city dump to dispose of some larger yard trash. As they were ditching their junk, they noticed a rather ornate but worn old wooden bed headboard. The wife suggested they take it home and try to restore it.

As they were loading this rather heavy and bulky item onto their truck, a cap on one of the posts came off and out began to pour dozens of old gold coins from the late 1800's. Both legs of this old headboard had been hollowed out and filled with a fortune in gold coins.

Now I know you're thinking: fat chance of something like that ever happening to me!

And yet, many of us have had dreams about finding some kind of treasure ... whether it's a genie in a bottle, winning gold rush or Lotto 649, coming into an inheritance, or stumbling across a bank account with long-forgotten money. Gosh, I even get excited when I find a couple of toonies in an old coat pocket!

In today's reading Paul speaks about treasure ... but it's a different kind of treasure ... a treasure that may be the most desirable of all, hidden in jars of clay ... Treasure hidden in us... and in the church ... in ordinary earthen vessels, with all their flaws, imperfections, and weaknesses.

Paul writes, "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. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us . . ."

This treasure of which Paul speaks is that of the Gospel ... the message of life and light in Christ Jesus, a treasure God has entrusted to us, to be shared with all people.

The treasure is about a relationship with the one who came proclaiming good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed.

The treasure is like Jesus' story of the pearl of great price. It is so valuable that when a merchant finds it he sells everything else that he owns and goes and buys that pearl. And yet, it can be the possession of the humblest believer, because it resides or shines "in our hearts." It is gifted to us, by God's grace, and we are called to steward the treasure, help it to grow, and share it with the world around us.

A story is told of a conversation that occurred after Jesus had ascended back into heaven ... it's one of those stories that is not real, but contains a measure of truth. Jesus was talking to an angel who asked, "Master, did you accomplish what you intended to accomplish while you were on earth?" "Yes," Jesus replied, "I spoke of God's gift of love, and showed it through miracles and healing and ultimately through the giving of my own life."

"Will people know of all that you have accomplished?" the angel asked. "Oh yes," Jesus replied. "I left my followers in Jerusalem with a charge that they were to carry the message of life into all the world."

The angel, knowing the frailty of these feeble creatures called humans, was somewhat taken aback. So, he asked the Master, "What if they fail? What plan do you have as a back-up?" And Jesus responded, "I have no back-up. I am counting on them."

We are those who have heard and experienced the Good News of what Jesus said and did, a message which has impacted our lives and has the power to impact the lives of all who hear and believe. We are those to whom Jesus has said: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

As individuals, and as a church, we are the beneficiaries of a spiritual treasure - of faith, of salvation, of new life in Christ - and not just for our own edification or our own needs ... but in order to show to the world that any glory, or achievement or success comes not merely through our human efforts, but through the power of God at work in and through us.

What are some of the things Paul says to us regarding this treasure? He says that it doesn't lie somewhere "out there." Too many people are obsessed with finding meaning and purpose *outside* of themselves. A better job, a nicer neighborhood, stylish clothes, travel abroad, a luxurious automobile, a river-front cottage... the list goes on ... all the while believing that the next purchase will be the one that really makes them feel fulfilled.

But when Paul says we have this treasure in jars of clay, he is saying that meaning and purpose and even happiness do not reside in things "out there." Rather, they come from the essence of who we are and whose we are. From

our being children of the Creator of Light and Love. As someone once said, "It's not what you own; it's what [or who] owns you that counts."

Secondly, Paul reminds us that if we have this treasure within, we can handle whatever comes to us from without. Listen again to his words as he describes the effect of this treasure: "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed . . ." Life can be cruel, Paul is saying, but if we have this treasure, adversity cannot conquer us.

We are told that success in living comes from making the right choices. But what about those things that happen to us that are not of our choosing? We need something to sustain us when things get rough on the outside--something that St. Paul had.

Evangelical pastor and television preacher David Jeremiah wrote a book titled *A Bend in the Road*, in which he tells how in the midst of a growing ministry, he was diagnosed with lymphoma. In 1999, a nodule was surgically removed from his neck and he underwent a stem cell transplant therapy.

In his book Jeremiah writes about the physical and emotional toll of this treatment. He speaks candidly of his battle with pain, nausea, and deep depression. And though at the present time his cancer is in remission, the doctors have told him that there are no guarantees. The cancer could come back, or it might not, but there is no way to be sure.

The book's title comes from his observation that sooner or later we will all come to a 'bend in the road' that we didn't expect, couldn't have foreseen, didn't want, didn't ask for, and can't postpone. We've got our life lined up and things are going in the right direction, and then one day everything changes; we come to a bend in the road, and life begins moving in a different (and generally unwanted) direction. If we do not have sufficient resources within at such a time, we are lost. We need that treasure of which Paul speaks and which enables us to proclaim with him: "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair; cast down, but not destroyed . . ."

And finally, we need to understand that this treasure is not to be found so much by looking to what we ourselves can do or accomplish, so much as it is in looking "to God."

The path to personal contentment begins not by looking merely to our own strength or ability or resources, but by looking to the One who is the source of life. The path to inner peace is not simply a matter of getting in touch with our feelings but getting in touch with our Creator and God. It requires soul searching prayer, trust in God's abundant grace, and the assurance of knowing that the emptiness or powerlessness we feel within can be filled by One who knows us and has loved us ... before we were ever born.

William Frey, an Episcopal bishop tells a story about a time when he volunteered to read to a college student named John who was blind. One day Frey asked John how he happened to lose his sight.

"A chemical explosion," John said, "at the age of thirteen."

"How did that make you feel?" Frey asked him.

"Life was over. I felt helpless. I hated God," John responded. "For the first six months I did nothing to improve my lot in life. I would eat all my meals alone in my room. Finally, one day my father entered my room and said, 'John, winter's coming and the storm windows need to be put on. That's your job. I want those hung by the time I get back this evening or else!' Then he turned, walked out of the room and slammed the door.

"I got so angry," said John. "I thought, 'Who does he think I am? I'm blind!' I was so angry I decided to do it--[that is, put up the storm windows]. I felt my way to the garage, found the windows, located the necessary tools, found the ladder, all the while muttering under my breath, 'I'll show them. I'll fall, then they'll have a blind and paralyzed son!'"

John concluded, "I got the windows up." And then he added these powerful words, "I found out later that never at any moment was my father more than four or five feet away from my side."

How do we find this treasure that surpasses all other treasures in the world? First of all, we recognize that there is nothing in this world on the outside of us that can give us what we truly crave. Secondly, we understand that one thing that makes this treasure so valuable is that, though we are fragile jars of clay, if we have this treasure within we can cope with any adverse condition which life gives us. And finally we recognize that to have this treasure we look not to ourselves but to God, who like a loving Parent is always with us regardless of our circumstances or our worthiness. "We have this treasure in jars of clay," writes St. Paul, "to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us . . ."

Thanks be to God!