

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18  
2 Corinthians 4:5-12

Second Sunday After Pentecost  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
June 3, 2018

## **Treasure in Earthen Vessels**

### *Introduction to the Psalm*

In our Psalm today we hear of God's knowledge of humankind. This knowledge extends from the womb to the end of life itself. The psalmist is greatly moved at the thought of God's knowing everyone and everything. Listen to these words from Psalm 139:1-6 and 13-18...

### *Introduction to the Epistle Lesson*

Our Epistle for this Second Sunday after Pentecost is taken from Paul's Second Letter to the Church in Corinth. Here Paul declares that God's light has given us knowledge of the glory of God in Jesus Christ. The treasure of the gospel is placed in human vessels—men and women and young people—as fragile as clay jars. Listen to these words from 2 Corinthians 4:5-12...

### *Sermon*

You may recall the story of the *Peanuts* cartoon where Charlie Brown was feeling low. On that particular day, life had not gone to his liking. Complaining to Lucy he said, "If I were to disappear tomorrow, nobody would miss me." Lucy said, "I don't think that's right." Charlie Brown began to perk up—"Oh, you don't?"—thinking that maybe she had some word of hope, some word of encouragement. Instead she said, "No, I don't think that's right. I think if you were to disappear *today*, nobody would miss you."

Have you ever felt that way, ever felt that nobody really cares about you, that you hardly matter and if you were to disappear, nobody would really notice? It's easy to feel that way, especially in a society where we place great emphasis on being successful, on being number one.

You may have felt like a second-class citizen for a long time. You were not the best looking, the smartest, or the most popular, and not a part of the in-group. Perhaps you never got to start on the basketball team; maybe spent most of the time sitting on the bench. That's what I did. You didn't get elected to the fraternity or sorority that you wanted to, but your best friend did. Or later you didn't get the job or the promotion you wanted and came to realize that you probably never would. You forgot that God loves you and that you are a child of the God of all creation. You felt that you didn't really matter and that if you just disappeared, nobody would miss you.

For all of us who have ever felt this way, Scripture would remind us: we'll never be unimportant, useless, unnoticed by God. Not only does God love every one of us, but he also needs and wants every one of us in his work. Paul described us as "earthen vessels," clay jars. These were used for shipping, storing, drinking liquids, and for preparing food. Precious objects and treasures were often kept in such containers. We are earthen vessels into which God has poured his priceless treasure, a treasure that he wants us to share—the treasure of the Gospel. The light, love, and truth of Jesus Christ; his service, his fellowship, and the glory of God in the face of Christ.

For Paul the ultimate source of the Gospel is the Creator God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness." New Testament scholar, Carl Holladay says:

Just as God gave light to the universe through the spoken word at creation, so now God has brought light to all humanity through the new creation accomplished in the Christ-event.

So what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord.

There are three thoughts I would like to share with you today on earthen vessels: First, earthen vessels, clay jars, are *fallible, imperfect*. If God could do something great through Paul,

then *God* was great; not Paul, but God! Paul was imperfect. He made mistakes. He didn't always succeed. He didn't know all the answers. Nonetheless, God was able to use him and use him mightily in spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ to the Gentile world.

Yes, God can use fallible, imperfect people like you and me. When we think of the great homerun hitters, we think of Babe Ruth and Hank Aaron. Yet for every homerun they hit, they struck out twice. But striking out, and walking back to the dugout with the bat on their shoulder, didn't cause them to give up. They went on to set homerun records.

Often our struggle and frustration comes from the fact that we will not accept our imperfection, our limitations. We let the good be overcome by a pursuit of the perfect. Maybe we can't sing or teach or serve as an officer or committee member as well as others seem to be able to do. Hear what Henry David Thoreau said, "The woods would be very silent if no birds sang except those that sing the best."

I read about a young boy in a church choir who wanted very much to sing a solo. Well, finally he got his chance. But he messed up and it devastated him. He had looked forward to that moment for a long time, and he had really tried. However, at the next choir practice, the director was giving out solos for the upcoming cantata, and lo and behold, he called the boy's name and gave him another solo. Later the young man said, "I messed up, but he gave me another chance and it saved me." And the next time he sang, it was beautiful.

Sometimes that's the way it is with us. We may fail, but God says, "That's alright. Let's try it again. Let's do it over." We're fallible, imperfect, but God can still use us.

Secondly, earthen vessels are *fragile*. This was the factual truth that Paul proclaimed. Serving God is not always easy, and at times we get broken. He talked about the trials he had faced. Affliction in every way, tension pressing in on him from every side. He was perplexed

from within. He was persecuted, mistreated, imprisoned—because he served God. Many of the battles he had fought, he lost. He was broken and hurt, and yet God continued to use him. He had been afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. (2 Cor. 4:8-10) And God was able to use Paul in magnificent ways.

There's no doubt that when we serve God, we can expect that it will not always be smooth sailing. The Sunday School teacher may sometimes feel that it's a waste of time because all of the effort seems to make little difference. Or the committee chairman who feels that nobody wants to do anything about making something better. Discouraged and frustrated, he wants to quit.

As we serve the Lord, there will be discouraging moments and lonely hours and rejection. We will know what it is to be broken, and we will know what it is to feel inadequate. We may feel we don't matter and we can't make much of a difference. But God has a wonderful way of using broken vessels—and that's you and me.

First, earthen vessels are imperfect; secondly, they are fragile, and thirdly: earthen vessels are *functional*. We can be *useful*. Here Paul was, weak and imperfect, broken as he was, but God had poured into him a wonderful treasure and had used him to pour that treasure into the lives of others. God did with Paul what Paul never thought could be done.

And the same is true for you and me. We are imperfect, we are broken, we may feel we don't matter. Remember, God can still use us as vessels of his treasure. He fills us with his good gifts of faith, hope, and love, and he can use us to be the means through which wonderful things happen here at Midway Presbyterian Church, in the Midway community, and even beyond our borders. It may not seem like we're making a difference, but we are.

Each word spoken, each visit, prayer, phone call, or note, each dollar given, each meal delivered, each Worship Serviced attended—they all matter. We don't seem to be making too much of a difference, our name won't be in the headlines; but out of such vessels, we work with God in building his kingdom.

Charlie Brown said, "I feel like if I disappear nobody will miss me." Sometimes we may feel that way, but it's not true. If we disappear from his service, if we don't use what talents, what time, what treasure we have, God will miss us because he really needs us and wants us to serve him in the building of his kingdom. And church members will miss us also.

Finally this story: There was a young boy who helped his father build a garage in the backyard, a two-story structure they built from the ground up. Said the young boy later:

I couldn't do much, I was not too old, but I could do errands for him. I would bring him water, get a hammer for him, pick up some nails he dropped, bring him a piece of wood when he needed it. I enjoyed doing that and when that garage was built, when people would comment on it, I would say, "My Daddy and I built that garage." But more important to me, was every now and then, when somebody was talking to my Daddy about it, he would say, "My son and I built that garage."

In the kingdom of God, the bringing of the water, the handling of nails and the giving of the hammer, may not seem like much, but in the end, God will say, "My children and I built the kingdom." We all have a part to play, and I hope every one of us is willing to do what we can, for if we are, we *will* make a difference. We will be the earthen vessels into which God pours the treasure of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and through us, pours that treasure into the lives of others.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.