

August 16, 2020

Mark 4: 26-34

II Corinthians 4: 5-10, 16-18; 5: 6-7

What We Contain

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This is one of those “what I did on my summer vacation” sermons. It’s about something that happened on one particular day – well, two particular days – that changed the way I hear a few verses of scripture that have never meant quite as much to me before as they do now. Since, for me, the verses came first, I’ll start with them – and then tell you about the days that changed them for me.

As it happens, the verses are from the writings of Paul – so maybe a word is in order about changing the way we hear what Paul wrote. Lots of people find the writings of Paul in the New Testament to be theological to a point beyond abstraction, somewhere in the neighborhood of irrelevant. Others find it hard to forgive him for the limitations of his time and his culture. Others scour the chapters of his letters in the New Testament hungry for the kind of stories that make the life of Jesus so compelling to us. But every once in a while, Paul finds his way to a turn of phrase that stops you in your tracks – a moment when you recognize, in him, the same kind of life that you feel going on in yourself – when he shows you how deeply he felt it, how honestly he described it. When he says that sometimes our prayers are just like “sighs too deep for words” – or when he calls it “the peace of God, which passes all understanding” – or when he says that “love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” – when Paul says things like that, maybe you catch a fleeting glimpse of someone who’s been living the same kind of life that you have.

One of those turns of phrase was lurking in the text I was given to ponder for this Sunday when we set our course through this summer with the theme, “New Beginnings” and decided to spend the month of August thinking with you about *perseverance*. In the midst of so many things going on now that make it hard to imagine a new beginning, but easy to long for one, Paul seems to know what it’s like to be up against so much: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed,” he says – “perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed...” Evidently Paul thinks that there are deeper reservoirs of perseverance in us than we know. But, he says – here it comes – “We hold this treasure in earthen vessels.” Someone who’s been living the same kind of life that we recognize in ourselves... We’ve all probably dropped a pot or fumbled a plate or chipped a wedge out of a cup, and come to recognize that part of the appeal of any clay vessel is the wonder of its being able to hold what it’s meant to hold while it can, until the time comes when

its fragility finally overtakes its utility. We've all probably noticed a certain family resemblance to the clay vessel whose day will surely come...

So – speaking of such a day...

I was reading the paper and sipping coffee one morning out on the terrace, a couple of weeks ago, when suddenly there was a loud cry from the other side of the garden fence. Our neighbor had discovered that her mother, Ruth, who had been Peter's and my first friend in the neighborhood, had gone to sleep the night before in her little mother-in-law apartment, but waked up with the angels. She was 86; she had spent the previous day gardening, and then swimming at the beach, and then reading on her deck. And in 86 years of days before that day, Ruth had, among other things, helped Edwin Land develop the Polaroid camera, taught kindergarten, raised 2 children, gotten a Master's in social work, treated military veterans for PTSD, taught windsurfing, and led a movement that had preserved hundreds of 18th-century New England houses. At some point during the one of all those days that turned out to be the last one, I had chatted with Ruth over the fence, swapped a little handful of my last raspberries for one or two of her first cherry tomatoes. On so many of the evenings of our years as her neighbor I'd noticed the light on in her upstairs window at bedtime and thought, all is well in the little community of our adjoining gardens as another day settles into history. So, hearing the cry that morning I dropped my coffee and sprinted through the garden gate – and as Ruth's daughter and I made our way up the stairs of the little apartment I was thinking, yes, earthen vessels is what they are, after all, aren't they? What we are.

That was the first day; but the change in my way of hearing Paul's verse really came on the other day – the day, last weekend, of Ruth's memorial service. It was in her garden, naturally; socially distanced, of course; and peppered with slightly envious comments about how her life had ended just as she, and most of us, would have wished. I stood just underneath the window in which we'd seen that light almost every night – and felt that strange kind of disorientation that follows the passing of someone who has seemed intrinsic to the very structure of reality: how can it be that this person is now nowhere to be found in this world?? Here one day, gone the next; earthen vessels for sure. But as I stood there, with the tide of stories and gratitude and affection coming in all around us, I heard Paul's other word as I hadn't heard it before: *treasure*. What we hold in those vessels is - treasure. What *is* that?

I remember reading, years ago, in Mark Twain's autobiography about the death of his daughter Susy (of a sudden viral infection, by the way), at the tender age of 24. Mark Twain found a remarkable metaphor to point to his disorientation and sadness. Suppose, he wrote, that

...a house burns down. The smoking wreckage represents only a ruined home that was dear through years of use and pleasant associations. By and by, as the days and weeks go on, first [the person whose house it was] misses this, then that, then the other thing. And [then realizes] that it was in that house. ...It cannot be replaced.

...It will be years before the tale of lost essentials is complete, and not till then can [the person] truly know the magnitude [of the loss].¹

That sense of it taking years to discover the full scope of a loss is so poignant, so familiar. That sense that no one will ever again work the particular alchemy of combining *that* sense of humor with *that* passion for crossword puzzles with *that* set of family memories with *that* sense of conscience about not using fossil fuels with *that* special appetite for dessert – it’s all so specific, so human – and, it turns out, it’s as vulnerable as a clay pot.

It’s not for me, or anyone, to say to Mark Twain, or to Ruth’s family, or any of you, that such a loss, such a dispersal of wonders, is not a catastrophe. I believe – I think we all believe, don’t we? – that every single life is as distinct as all that – and, if we could all see as God sees, as irresistible as that, as precious as that. And if we needed a parable of that truth in this moment, alas, we need look no farther than the number that, these days, is revised upward every day: 166,750² : that many lives snuffed out by Covid-19 even though some people still can’t be bothered to wear a mask, that many sparkling facets and foibles scattered again to the garden.

But Paul doesn’t think it ends there. And, after last weekend, neither do I. Because ... it is *treasure* that we hold in these earthen vessels – to show, as Paul says, “that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” The treasure is conserved. We are afflicted but not crushed – perplexed but not driven to despair – struck down, but not destroyed – because what’s in us is not lost – not, at least, if we live with the kind of soul and conscience, the kind of humility and moxie, that Jesus invites and hopes for in us. The one thing we know – but we knew this all along – is that we won’t be able to hold on to it. We’ll have to let go of it one startling morning. But it won’t be lost. In fact, it’ll be found – found that much more easily, picked up and run with, maybe – if we learn to recognize the treasure we contain with the kind of knowledge that Paul talks about, the kind of knowledge that has shone in our hearts borrowing its light from the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Probably none of us knows as much as we might know about the glory of God that has been contained in our hearts ever since God first said, “Let light shine out of darkness.” Probably we could all know it better, study it harder, take it out and look at it, savor its sweetness and inquire in its temple. We contain so much more than we

¹ Mark Twain, Chapters from My Autobiography, Ch. 6 (October 5, 1906). For the sake of making Twain’s remarkable metaphor more accessible to all genders, I have edited the passage slightly.

² This was the number of deaths from Covid-19 posted by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University as of Thursday, August 13.

know: things we've learned about justice, about suffering, about character, about forgiveness. What do *you* know about those things? What is the sum total of your knowledge of those holy things, which belong to God but which God has loaned to you, to each of us, and encouraged us to borrow from each other? What do you know, what have you learned in all the days of your earthen living, about grace? about blessing? About joy? About sorrow? About equality? What are you learning about privilege, or responsibility, or integrity, or healing, or courage? It's *treasure*, and you're holding it – for now. What do you know about Jesus – about his good company, his compassion, his convictions? It may not seem like much, and some of it may be all tangled up in theology, but – whatever you know, whatever you do contain, is *treasure*, even if it's small as a mustard seed – and it will grow in the garden of your days. What seeds of God's own truths have been planted in you by the days of your life, and grown, you know not how, day by day, until here you are, on this day in the history of the world? And when you turn your light on, what tranquility and comfort and courage do others see in the window of you?

It's all treasure. Yes, we hold it in earthen vessels, clay jars, pottery made of the same stuff that makes our gardens bloom. It's all treasure – whatever it is that you contain of the light and the glory borrowed from God. But there's no keeping it – because the startling day will come. So the thing to do is not to forget what you know. The thing to do is to pass it on – to the movement you start, to the family you raise, to the things you help to make, to the disciplines of care and gentleness that you practice. Just don't forget it – because this is the knowledge of the glory of God. Persevere in knowing it, and in passing it on – because this is what glory looks like. And we all hold it in earthen vessels; we're all borrowing light from each other's windows, in these adjoining gardens where, for the time being, we live side by side.

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