

“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.” What treasure do we carry? You and I who are clay jars made by the master potter’s hand. Jesus said, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he went and sold all that he had in order to buy that field. What treasure is ours from God? It is nothing tangible; neither gold nor silver buried in the ground. It is not even something as tangible as knowledge or membership. 1 Corinthians reminds us that even these things will come to an end. No what we hold in our clay jars is, in many ways, ineffable. It is some quality of hope, some resiliency of spirit and a joy that runs deeply within us, regardless of the circumstances of the day. Our hope is set in Christ.

Paul, writes these words before us to a young church, frightened and struggling. There future uncertain, he writes to remind them who they are. You are treasure holders. Like the jars at the wedding in Cana, we hold the gift of God. We are none of us flawless, none of us perfect. We are chipped, and cracked and we have known the refiner’s fire. Do you ever wonder at God’s choosing? Why he would pick such fragile vessels for his Word in our world. Humility may be one of the greatest lessons of the Christian life. Clay though we may be, and easily broken, we are the bearers of Christ to the world. We are the stewards of the mystery. We are the ones who must speak and touch and heal and bless.

Next week we will take up the woman at the well. She arrived at the well with an empty jar and she left with living water. Ours is such a gift. Neither gold nor silver that can be counted, and kept for tomorrow, but water, that seeps into the earth, and into our spirits and offers life to us all.

The end of verse 7. “So that it many be made clear, that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” Once again we find our humility and our humanity. This treasure we hold does not come from us. It is a rare gift. Do you, as I do, feel the privilege of it. The privilege of carrying a hope within you that will never forsake and never abandon. The privilege of carrying a hope within you that can lift another from despair. You and I do not harness the power of God, for we are made too much of clay for that, we simply bear witness to what God is able to do.

Verse 8. “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” This is not exactly happy news. Perhaps it was meant only for Paul’s community in Corinth and not our community in Encinitas. Perhaps the ancient people of God, knew this kind of suffering, but we will not. That would be nice, but it is not true. We will know what it is to be crushed. We will be struck down. Perhaps you are living such a moment in your life right now. These words may not be happy news, but hear the Good News, which is an all together different thing. We are afflicted, but not crushed; per-

plexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. Because of Jesus. We have been brought low, but we are being continually lifted to hope. For Biblical humility is not meekness that leaves us powerless against this world. It is rather, quiet confidence in one whose power and mercy are beyond our own. It is hope when there is no reason for hope, peace when all around us seems as sand and the courage to lay our lives at the throne of God's mercy.

In the early 1970's my great aunt and uncle lived in Van Nuys. From floor to ceiling, along all of the walls of two rooms were cabinets my great uncle Red had built for his wife, to house all of Bernice's heirloom china, brought from the Midwest and handed down through the generations. In the 1971, San Fernando earthquake, 90% of Bernice's china came crashing to the ground, the shattered pieces covering every corner of her home. Bernice worked in a hospital, in those years, and before she could even begin to take in the damage, her phone rang and she was called to the hospital as an emergency responder. With a heavy heart, she left, leaving her teenage son Gene at home. Gene had severe epilepsy. Weakened by the disease, he was, at that time, walking with a walker for balance, and Bernice instructed him to stay in his room and be safe. Six hours later, Bernice returned weary from the hospital. She braced herself for the task that lay ahead and she opened the door. The room, so recently covered in shattered glass, was spotless. The undamaged china that had survived the quake was lovingly wrapped in tissue paper and set carefully in boxes. And in the middle of the room, sat Gene. A broom still in his hand, sweaty and grinning up at her. He had worked tirelessly for hours, wanted to save his mother the pain of sweeping up the brokenness. Bernice looked at the treasure in the boxes at her feet and then at her son. Some treasures cannot be counted.

We are afflicted, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. Because it is Christ who lives in us. And with such a treasure, our hope, and the hope of the world are assured. Amen