

Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church
Brillion, WI

Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 6 and 10, 2012

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For 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 the glory of God 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. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

I've always wondered why angels don't take a more starring role in churches than they do today. They're busy – I know – riding in ambulances; keeping watch over our playgrounds; and keeping devils off the premises. But they're angels so I'm guessing if the Lord wanted, they could find the time to put together a sermon for Sunday or teach some pretty stellar Bible classes. Just imagine that for a second. Don't you think it'd be pretty amazing to have the archangel Michael share insights with us on the Lord's divine military tactics? Or how about sending the very well known Gabriel down here to comment a bit more on his birth announcement to Mary? What if the legions of angels that Jesus said he had at his disposal fanned out to Christian churches all over the world to take over pulpits on Sundays? I'm telling you I think that would draw.

That points out an apparent problem we have in the Christian church. Paul tells us today that the packaging for the gospel is people. And people are a bit off. One would think that if there were a massive upgrade available, like for example angels, the Lord would choose it. Packaging matters. If you want the consumer to buy, then you have to package the product attractively, creatively, and in a splashy way. Do you see what I mean? The gospel has a packaging problem. It's packaged inside of average, normal, everyday Joes.

Now that might frustrate you. Believe me, I understand that. No doubt, it's frustrated a lot of Christians through history. I feel for you because here at Trinity the most obvious packaging you're going to get for the gospel is Henzi and Bourman. I understand if that leaves you praying, "Lord, you can only put so much lipstick on a pig. Isn't there a better way to package Jesus for me?" Too bad we couldn't get Gabriel as a guest preacher today, right? The Lord says here in 2 Corinthians, "I want you to think about this a little bit more. There's a reason why I use people to package the gospel and not angels. It's better that way. Let me tell you why."

The people in Corinth had a tendency to be obsessed with the packaging of the gospel. In his first letter to them, Paul got on their case because some were saying, "I follow Peter." Others were saying, "I follow Paul," or, "I follow Apollos." Paul's point to them was, "Shouldn't you all be saying, 'I follow Jesus.'? Do you think Christ is divided?" When they got that message in Paul's letter it helped them say, "Duh. Of course, you're right, Paul. We follow Christ." So they got over their obsession with the Lord's packaging, people, at least for a while.

Then their obsession with packaging reared its ugly head a second time. There were these guys who seemed to be saying, "Paul doesn't project the right image. He's not a good enough speaker. He seems to say one thing and do another. He doesn't even have the right credentials. Paul isn't projecting the right image for you guys. You need someone better for your church." We know from Paul's reaction that the Corinthians must have been nodding their heads saying, "Boy, that sounds right. If our pastors are amazing speakers and they have all the right credentials and they project an amazing image to people, then we'll be better off as a church."

These guys called super apostles make a pretty strong case, don't they? It would be pretty fantastically easy to swallow their argument hook, line, and sinker. Who doesn't want a church leader that on the outside looks perfect; makes people tune into the amazing words coming out of his mouth; and has credentials that make people think, "Wow, this guy has really got it together."? Everybody wants a pastor who projects a perfect, polished image because by nature we're pulled to the superficial.

Paul had something to say to that though. There's a legend called *Excalibur and the Sword in the Stone*. It says that the rightful heir to the throne of England would be able to pull Excalibur out of the stone. There's a whole Wikipedia page devoted to the sword; what it meant to Arthur; and the magical powers it supposedly had. You know what nobody mentions though? The stone. Nobody talks about what it looks like; how big it is; or even what color it is. Why? The stone has no importance except that it held Excalibur. That's Paul's point. **"For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." (v. 5)** Paul is saying, "It's not about the stone that held Excalibur. It's not about the packaging. It's not about preaching 'ourselves.' It's about preaching Jesus Christ as Lord." **"For 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 the glory of God in the face of Christ." (v. 6)** Paul is hammering home God's point. Being a preacher isn't about the preacher. It's about letting people see the light that is the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

There's a story about a pious woman who came to church every Sunday. She had a strong handle on what this part of the Bible meant for her faith. She'd arrive early to church. She did that because it allowed her to settle her thoughts and give her time to pray. She really treasured her time in prayer even though every week her prayer at church was almost always the same. This is what she said, "Lord, Jesus it is your

will that you use sinful men to share the light of Christ. Help my pastor to get out of the way of your message and proclaim Christ." God answered her prayer every week because although her pastor wasn't a flashy, fun preacher he was a faithful one. He told her about the forgiveness of sins through Jesus. He explained how she had been reconciled to the Father. So every week after the sermon she went home and prayed, "Lord, thank you. I've seen your light today. Amen."

Hopefully you're thinking, "I see that. It's not about the preacher. It's not even about how the preacher says it. I should look for Christ in his words and take them to heart no matter what. But I still don't get why God doesn't pick better more talented people to do the job."

If you are wondering about that, your thoughts are running along legitimate lines. There's a perfectly good reason that the Lord chooses the preachers he chooses. It's embedded in verse seven. **"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." (v. 7)** The treasure is in jars of clay. The treasure we're talking about is the knowledge of Christ that we talked about earlier. Notice though that the treasure is hidden. The treasure is in jars of clay. Paul's point is that the packaging for the treasure is the most boring, most normal, most common household material of Paul's day. The treasure is in jars of clay. Who or what are these common, run-of-the-mill jars of clay? They're people. They're Paul. They're Bourman. They're Henzi. Jars of clay that's all we are. We're the bland, normal, average packaging for the gospel of Jesus that lives in us and that we share in this church.

I went to school for eight years of college and seminary with about 40 current WELS pastors. In my family alone there are four of us WELS pastors. Hopefully that gives me some credibility when I tell you that we're all jars of clay. We're guys who put the wrong hymns in the bulletin occasionally; stick their foot in their mouth at least once/day; and get super nervous they're going to mess up someone's name during a baptism. Even nationally, the ranks of the clergy aren't a real glorious bunch. There was big newspaper that took a look at clergy health a couple of years ago. It's actually pretty embarrassing to the profession. Here's the quote: "Members of the clergy now suffer from obesity, hypertension and depression at rates higher than most Americans. In the last decade, their use of antidepressants has risen, while their life expectancy has fallen."¹ The article went on to say that while clergy were good at taking care of others, they struggled to take care of themselves. Are you beginning to see why Paul calls preachers jars of clay?

Paul goes even a bit further than I just did. He points out that we're not just jars of clay we're jars of clay with some cracks. That's what he means when he goes on to say, **"We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed." (v.**

¹<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/02/nyregion/02burnout.html?pagewanted=all>

8-9) These are the kind of people who carry around the gospel of Christ – cracked jars of clay.

But we still haven't solved our problem. Why this packaging for the light of Christ? Why jars of clay? Why these people? Why not a treasure chest? Why not people who can project a perfect, flawless image all the time? **But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” (v. 7)** That's a head scratcher, isn't it? You may say, “Seriously God? You use jars of clay on purpose?” God says, “Yup. I do it on purpose.” And he goes on to explain why. He says he wants to show that the all-surpassing power is from him and not from us.

What does he mean by that and how does that work? Play out a scenario with me. Imagine a church where the perfect pastor exists. He's charismatic. He's charming. He's smart, radiant, and people like his sermons so much they'd stay in church all day if he'd continue talking. If that kind of person exists, then people would go home and you know what they'd say? They'd say, “My pastor is awesome. I love that guy.” What's the problem with that? God doesn't want it to be about people. He wants it to be about the treasure inside. He wants it to be about Christ. He wants it to be about God's power in the gospel not the power in the perfectly spoken word or the attraction of a handsome face.

Pastor Henzi and I sometimes laugh together because it's a minor miracle if we get through all three of our weekly worship services without forgetting something; saying something awkward; or making a minor mistake. We had our most epic worship service that we've had for a while during our eighth grade graduation a couple of Wednesdays ago. I put the prayers in the wrong spot. I went to sing with the choir in the balcony when I should have stayed down below. It was a real mess. I'm telling you it was a real jar of clay moment. But I'll tell you something else that was true in that same service. Jesus went out that day. We still held out God's treasure to human creatures.

God doesn't want Michael, Gabriel, or any other upgrade to his jars of clay in his Christian churches. He gives the job to jars of clay on purpose. He wants there to be no mistake that it's about the treasure that's hidden in the jars and not the jars themselves. So that's what we have here at Trinity. You've got jars of clay. More importantly, you have God's treasure. You have Christ Jesus as Lord. You have the knowledge of the glory of God that you see in the face of Christ. You have Jesus. You have his gospel. You have his forgiveness. You have his reconciliation. You have this treasure in jars of clay so that it's about the treasure not about the packaging. And that's the way it's supposed to be. Amen.