**“Treasure In Clay Pots”**

II Corinthians 4:1, 5-12

I well remember the first Sunday I wore a clerical robe, a black Geneva robe to be more precise. And on that first Sunday wearing that robe, I just felt so awkward. At the time, I was a first-year seminary student, and I was home for the Christmas holidays. The pastor of my home church encouraged me to be the liturgist on that particular Sunday. When I got to the church, he handed me one of his old robes and said, “You’ve got to get used to wearing this sooner or later, so just go ahead and wear it today.” I put it on and stepped out in front of my home congregation to read scripture and lead them in the Call to Worship, and I just felt so awkward.

Who was I to stand up in front of my fellow church members in a clerical robe? These were the people who had watched me grow up. Now, I wasn’t a bad kid, but I was a normal kid. And that means that my congregation knew very well my all-too-human side. Who was I trying to kid, wearing that robe? On that first Sunday, I just felt so awkward.

To be honest with you, I still felt awkward the next summer when I did a ten-week internship at Second Presbyterian Church in Spartanburg, SC. Every Sunday I had to get up in front of the congregation and wear a robe. And I felt awkward. Now, it isn’t like I’d robbed a bank. I obey the laws of the land; although, my speedometer does on occasion rise above the speed limit. In general, I’ve always lived a fairly decent life. But I’m going to tell you a secret. I’m as human as the next person. Perhaps you’ve already noticed.

You see, to one degree or another, ministers have to live their lives in a bubble. Some people, maybe most people, expect ministers to be perfect. Well, maybe not perfect, but pretty close to it. A minister should never get mad. A minister should never be jealous. A minister should have perfect control over every facet of his or her life and home. A minister should be a perfect reflection of Jesus. Well, maybe not perfect, but pretty close to it. Sadly, I’ve got news for you. I’m not perfect, not even close. Perhaps you’ve already noticed.

But I’ve got even more news for you. Neither is any other pastor you’ve ever known. If you think they were, then maybe they were just a little more careful living inside that bubble. Don’t believe me? Well, ask their spouse or closest friends! I’m sure they’d be happy to straighten you out.

The wife of the Rev. Billy Graham was once asked if she had ever thought about divorcing her husband. “No,” she said, “I’ve never thought about divorcing him. I thought about killing him a time or two. But never divorce.” Even Billy Graham wasn’t perfect, not even close. Just listen to his wife.

Well, on that first Sunday and throughout the next summer and quite honestly for a good while after that I just felt so awkward. Who was I to stand up in front of a congregation wearing a clerical robe?

Now, have you ever felt that way? Well, maybe not about a clerical robe, but maybe you were once called by a member of the Nominating Committee. And they asked you prayerfully to consider answering the call to be ordained as an Elder or maybe a Deacon. Sometimes people will quickly respond, “Who me? Oh no, not me; I’m not fit to be ordained.”

Many times, a member of the Christian Education Committee will call up a church member and say, “We need you to be a Sunday School teacher for our first graders.” “Who me? Oh no, not me; I’m not fit to be a Sunday School teacher.”

Now granted, there are qualifications for being an Elder or a Deacon or a Sunday School teacher. But if the Nominating Committee or the C.E. Committee calls you up and says, “We see the qualifications in you for this responsibility,” why do some of us still insist that they are wrong?

Well, maybe that’s because in the church we often get the cart before the horse. You see, some churches liftup an idolized version of Biblical characters, men and women of perfect faith and perfect commitment, and then they challenge their members to live up perfectly to this perfect ideal. But, folks, even the greatest characters in the Bible weren’t perfect, far from it. In the Old Testament, Abraham lied about his marriage to Sarah—not to protect Sarah, but to protect himself, and not once but twice. Moses got so angry one time he committed murder. King David was not only an adulterer, he also rigged the death of the husband of his pregnant mistress. In the New Testament. Peter denied even knowing Jesus, much less being one of his followers, not once, not twice, but three times. James and John conspired to get the best seats right next to Jesus in his coming kingdom. And all the disciples argued and fought over which one of them was the greatest.

So, what’s going on? Why does God pick characters like these to do God’s ministry? Well, we might also want to ask why does God pick folks like us to do God’s ministry? The answer is found in today’s reading.

“But we have this treasure in clay pots, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”

You see, in the metaphor, we are the clay pots. And notice that God doesn’t choose to put God’s treasure into an Oriental vase from the Ming Dynasty. Nor does God put God’s treasure into a steel container where it would be safe and secure. Instead, God puts God’s treasure into a plain, ordinary, functional, yet fragile clay pot, like you and me. You see, if we were strong as steel or beautiful and priceless, then the focus would be on us, instead of on the power of God in us. If people are only looking at us and admiring the perfection of our strength and our beauty, they will might miss the brightness of God’s treasure that God put in us.

It’s like this: If you are a Christian then that means there is treasure inside you. Now, that doesn’t mean that *you* are a *perfect diamond*. But there is a powerful treasure inside of you, clay pot that you are. (I know I’m mixing my metaphors, but so does Paul.) According to today’s reading, God’s powerful treasure is the light that God put inside of you, which is the knowledge of the glory of God, as seen in the face of Jesus. The darkness in our lives begins to light up, as we see and understand God, as seen Jesus.

Now, being a clay pot does not mean that we can live any old way we want to live. The more we know about Jesus, the closer we want to get to him. And the closer we get to Jesus, the more we know about God and God’s glory. And the closer we get to God, the brighter God’s powerful light shines inside the clay pot of our lives.

Too many metaphors?

Well, let me put it this way. That’s why we bring our fragile, ordinary, broken lives to church—to grow in the knowledge of God’s glory in Jesus and to allow God’s powerful light to shine through our lives. But let me warn you; it’s not easy. You don’t become a perfect light on the day you become a Christian. The Christian life is a journey toward God that lasts a lifetime, and I’ve got news for you. None of us ever gets close to perfection. Quite frankly, I find that when I strive for perfection, that’s when I mess up the most because that’s when I’m trying to shine my light and not the light of God in me.

You see, when I finally realized that it is not my light that entitles me to wear a clerical robe, but the powerful light of the knowledge of God’s glory that God put in me, well, that’s when I began to get a little more comfortable wearing a robe.

In conclusion, I’ve got a little ‘show and tell.’ Years ago, my wife, Zoe Anne, went on an archeological dig in Israel. And she brought back with her this little clay pot. Now the purpose of this pot is to be sort of like a little flashlight or night light. You pour the oil in the top, and then you light the lamp here at the spout. You can even see where the spout is a little charred from burning.

I think this is the type of clay pot that Paul is talking about. We are the clay pot. The knowledge of God’s glory is the oil. When we come to church, we are filled with oil, and the treasured oil is ignited. And then we are sent back out into the world so that the light of God’s glory can shine through us.

You’re the clay pot. God provides the treasured oil of God’s glory. Go out into the world and let God’s light shine through you. Get comfortable with that!

Let us Pray:

Glorious God, fill us with the treasured oil of your glory, and light your flame in our lives, all for the sake of your glory. Amen

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