

“Earthen Vessels”  
Ridgley Joyner, June 10, 2018  
2 Corinthians 4:1-5:1

Last night I was at the Davis home for the progressive dinner and quickly scooted out at 9:30pm because my husband shared that my sermon still needed some work. It was just a joke at the time, but in all seriousness, one of the things I’ve learned about writing sermons is that you have to wait on the spirit’s timing—that the sermon is constantly being updated even up until the moment I’m preaching it. We Presbyterians believe that God uses us as a vessel for the Word God needs to speak to us. And I take that very seriously—mostly because I’ve experienced it, and so has Patrick- we often will find in our sermons that we say one thing and you hear another, or I think my sermon is TERRIBLE and it changes someone’s life.

In our passage this morning, Paul speaks of the very same thing—that God uses him as a vessel to speak and to preach. There is not much consensus as to whether the book of 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians was one complete letter or letters that were fragmented and pieced together to the way we see it now. Biblical Scholars believe this because it seems in these chapters 3-7 that Paul is speaking as if he has been to Corinth since the 1<sup>st</sup> letter to the Corinthians, and there are hints of other preachers leading the church to doubt the authenticity of Paul.

Now, I’ll be frank. Paul is not my favorite. I HATE preaching Paul because he sometimes talks in circles and I find myself crosseyed in the end. But one thing I do love about Paul is the way he teaches the people of God through his own particular experience of God, and also through his metaphors- which sometimes make more sense to me than the parables of Jesus. (again, rare.)

This week I was reading the lectionary’s passage for this Sunday and it was merely 2<sup>nd</sup> Cor 4:12-5:1. I found myself drug into most of the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter with Paul’s imagery. It’s safe to say that Paul has a LOT going on in this chapter, but I immediately was struck by his pottery imagery, so struck that I began to realize that perhaps God was wanting me to chew on this idea for a while, and coincidentally- I think the Spirit of God is pushing more than just me to think about it this AM.

Youth Sunday marked the beginning of the Season of Pentecost in which we celebrate the “birthday of the church” and the coming of the Holy Spirit post Jesus Ascension. This season, Patrick has been inviting us to think about what it means to live IN the spirit and the implications of our life as Christians. These next two weeks, I want to invite us to think about how the SPIRIT lives in US and the implications of our life as Christians. I met with my spirital director this week and we were chatting a bit about my development of faith and spirituality throughout seminary. And, as an external processor, I discovered that it was in seminary that I truly began to experience scripture and God through the art of making things—when I started at Columbia all of the classrooms Patrick had learned in became study spaces or empty classrooms. We had a new fancy building that was LEED certified and state of the art. Unfortunately that left the rooms in Campbell hall dusty and lonely.

So a student who was a senior at the time, decided to repurpose a series of rooms for her senior project. She created a space for Sabbath for many of us- it had a reading area, a yoga area, crafts and paint and canvases, left over materials for collages. It became a place that weekly hosted creativity workshops encouraging us to worship our creator God by creating things.

It was in this place, SPACE it was called, I discovered the spirit of God rampant at work in my soul when I created and made things. That led me to discover crafting... all the way to Gardening as a spiritual practice.

It truly molded how I thought about my creator God—as one who created the sky and seas, the day and the night, but also as one who formed us from the dust- I experience God most through creating things.

Paul uses this metaphor in his letter to the Corinthians that in many ways returns us to this idea of a Creator God. He speaks of God as giving us a treasure in an earthen vessel—a clay pot. A piece of pottery. An ordinary vessel that holds great things—Paul invites us to think about not only living in the spirit---but the spirit living in us. And that we must ever remember this treasure as a gift from God to show the world the glory of God.

I had always admired pottery and my friend Lisle would always make it on the wheel at Montreat and I just would stand there mesmerized. So Will and I decided to take a couples class one month as a date night making pottery bowls. How hard could it be? Much harder than I ever anticipated.

You see, It is an incredibly intimate process—it involves pushing, and tugging, immense pressure and also a lot of strength. Just the right amount of hard pressure, just the amount of gentle guiding.

You have to start with a lump of wet clay, but before you can start throwing, you have to “wedge” the clay. This is a process of folding it over a few times or slamming down hard on a surface to remove any air bubbles that might get trapped in the clay. Air bubbles can cause wobbles and cause you to get “off-center” on the wheel.

Once you start on the wheel, you have to “center” the clay.

This takes more muscle than you realize and you have to lean in, using your body weight to press against the clay in two directions so that the movement of the wheel helps to center it on your bat.

After you center your clay, you have to make sure that you providing enough water as nourishment to the clay to mold and shape it but not lose it's shape completely.

You make a hole in the top with a thumb or finger and slowly press down to create an opening. Then you use a rib tool or your fingers to slowly widen the opening and shape it into the vessel you want.

When throwing on the wheel and preparing your piece of pottery, you have to shape the piece from the inside out. The outside can be trimmed and honed later in the process, but it's the inside curve that you pay attention to when throwing. There's a give and a take to centering clay. You have to respect the integrity of the clay and "let go" a bit in order to allow the vessel to come to life.

*Paul says--We look at what cannot be seen, for what can be seen is only temporary, what cannot be seen is eternal--*

What cannot be seen in the art of throwing pottery is the memory of the clay—

Surprisingly enough clay has memory, so when you are creating your piece on the wheel you want to work from the inside, out. You can't work from the outside in or drastically shape and reshape the clay b/c it holds the memory of the shape its first molded into. You have to add a certain amount of water to keep the clay malleable, but if you add too much water, the clay will lose its integrity and strength and won't withstand firing.

Pottery pieces are some of the oldest remnants of society. It seems that this mere dust molds into this eternal piece that tells the story of a culture even today. An ordinary piece of pottery that reflects something extraordinary. That is what we are.

In pottery there is this sort of death to one form and a unique flow of the process of centering and moving with pressure and weight and leaning brings life to a new piece, a new vessel, a new way of carrying the glory of God.

The process of making such a durable and long lasting piece of pottery requires such an intimate process between you and the matter, between you and the wheel—there's pushing and tugging, and pressing and bearing, and moistening and letting go—there's honor and respect and feeling the flow of things—this is one of the richest metaphors Paul can leave us with today, because we truly are the broken yet beautiful clay pots that are formed from the dust.

WE are the beloved creations of God that find ourselves living life in a much harder world than we could imagine. And Paul's hope to us today is that while we are the pottery, we are not a finished product- God's spirit is in and among us each and every day—and THIS is that treasure that God gives us—the gift of God's presence and the gift of being a vessel that shares the glory of God merely by being God's creation. God, our potter is at work in us, but in a way that perhaps is like this "wedging" --that of slamming down struck down but not destroyed but refigured—re centered, this time with out the air bubbles that might cause the clay pot to get off center.

As clay jars, each unique in our own way, we might find that the treasure from God needs to be shared, but in a way that requires us to lean in where it might get uncomfortable. To trust in the flow of God's process and call—the feel the movement of the spirit in your life and might require more strength than you anticipated.

God is our potter at work in us. We are merely clay on God's wheel. And when the spirit of God is in and among us we might find that we feel slammed and folded and pushed and leaned into by our current circumstances. Perhaps you feel like you are in the flow and moving with the spirit and God is doing a new thing within you.

Friends, God is our potter at work in us. As Presbyterians that stem from the reformation, we believe that we have been reformed yet always being reformed by God's spirit. It is active and enacted on us-

So if you find yourself lost and looking for direction, lean into the momentum.

When you find yourself spinning out of control know that it is forming you into something to reflect the glory of God soon.

Know that when you don't feel strong, God is providing just the amount of support, and nourishment you need to stay up on your feet.

God is our potter at work in all of us from the inside out. Let us remember who we are: earthen vessels—ordinary pieces that reflect and extraordinary Gospel.

So I leave you with this question--- a question you are invited to reflect on for the next week:

Where is God working on you?

Where do you need to be shaped or reminded once more of your identity?