

“So That”

Rev. Ridgley Joyner

June 17, 2018

2 Corinthians 4:1-5:1

My friend Lisle lives in western north Carolina. She was my roommate in seminary and at the time she was engaged planning a wedding. Her mother-in-law Becky is a potter and worked with Lisle and her fiancée Paul to make their own pottery everyday china. The pieces had a theme of evergreen and ivy—two plants that represented their families’ history- Paul’s grandfather’s tree farm in Charlottesville and Lisle’s late mother whose ivy plant that served as one of her memories. The evergreen and the ivy leaves were woven throughout the plate and when we break bread to this day with them I always think of the coming together of the Gwynn-Garrity family.

Pottery is unique to its creator. It is not perfect by any standards, but it is perfect to the potter. It reflects much more of a story, a process. Many pieces of pottery serve a purpose. In Lisle and Paul’s house it serves a purpose to hold their food, but also it reminds them of their commitment to love and marriage.

Last week we learned of the process of throwing clay—how it is harder than one might think, how God is our creator molding us like a potter on a wheel. How it begins first with the potter “slamming” the clay, folding it over and over again to push out the air bubbles for the piece off center when throwing. Then, to center the piece-- The process requires a lot of strength, pressure, but just the right amount of pressure. Guiding but not too much guiding. Enough water for nourishment, but not too much water because it might explode in the kiln.

We are reminded that the clay has memory- so when shaping the piece it is important to recognize that it always remembers it’s original form, so you must work from the inside out—a gradual process of slow reshaping—into the piece that we see post kiln today.

Last week I left those of you who were here a question to ponder—

Where might God be molding and reshaping you? Where is the Holy Spirit at work IN you? How might God be calling you to remember once more your identity- the person God fearfully and wonderfully made you to be?

Paul writes in the epistle of 2nd Corinthians an invitation to think of ourselves as earthen vessels- as clay jars- that God has filled with treasure- that treasure being the light of Christ.

One of the things I’m very struck by in Paul’s dissertation is his use of the phrase “so that”. Now last week I shared my distaste for paul verbosity, but much of what we read today of Paul is indicative to that time and place’s use of language. Paul was writing to a well educated community in ancient Greece—a culture in which oration, language, and

writing was important, especially when writing to the community of the Corinth. So, while he is very wordy, his letters served as an art form—much like the original Hebrew language in the Old Testament.

Paul's letters were written with a specific style and were most likely the result of not just him sitting at a desk quietly penning a letter but rather the minutes of an outreach meeting—that of a missionary team.

Paul says—

We find this treasure in clay jars SO THAT we may know that this power is from God and not us—and that it is by God's mercy that we are even able to do the miinstyr we do—that we do good deeds SO THAT those whom we meet encounter the glory of God SO THAT thanksgiving to God increases. (2x)

A quotable phrase of Paul's is that in order for God to be glorified and increased we must decrease. So part of this metaphor of being a clay jar is to recognize that while we are fearfully and wonderfully made in the eyes of God the potter, it is only so that we might glorify God and not ourselves.

For the jar holds the treasure. The Jar is beautiful in the eyes of the beholder but the jar holds the treasure.

I think that is hard for us, not because we loooove to be the center of attention, but because we are earnest people. We love God so much, we love our churches so much that we almost try so hard to increase the Glory of God it becomes so much more about us rather than the actual glory of God. And this is the reminder Paul gives us—and what the season of Pentecost reminds us of—that part of being a clay jar is getting beyond ourselves.

The summer of 2010 I was a fresh college graduate ready to take on the world- and it started with an adult mission trip to Santa Clara, Cuba where our church had cultivated a relationship with another Presbyterian church in that village.

I was so excited for two reasons. 1) my great grandmother was an immigrant from Cuba who fled during the communist revolution—I had always heard stories about her life there and how she made it to America thanks to a Presbyterian church in Marisa, IL who essentially adopted her and her orphaned siblings. I had hoped to gain at least a glimpse into her life that she had in Cuba.

My second reason was that it was one of my first mission trips as an “adult”. I had been on several short term missions trips with my youth group. I loved them and grew so close to my church family through them. But I remember being so excited about the *doing* of the trip—hosting VBS, building a wall, mixing cement—The feeling of accomplishing a task for the people I came to serve.

The names of the people I served? I don't think I could tell you then.

I didn't know what to expect visiting Cuba because we had been very honest with the Cuban government and came to the country on a religious visa. Were we to build something for them? No, the government wouldn't have it. Were we to lead a VBS for them? No, they knew who Jesus was, they had VBS, and the government DEFINITELY didn't want us proselytizing.

Our partnership with the church in Santa Clara was through their pastor Omar. We had worked for years sending money to Omar for them to build their church's Christian Education Building. They had such deep deep pride for it. When we came to Cuba that was one of the many things they showed us—we got to tour the FPC Spartanburg Christian Ed building they had built. The people of the church had done it themselves over a period of years. On one of the walls they had this mural of a dove flying between FPC Spartanburg in SC to Cuba at the church in Santa Clara. They had seen our relationship as something the spirit of God deeply connected us to one another to glorify God. What a treasure.

So we didn't do anything. We didn't build that building, we didn't tell them how to build the building, we didn't come and mix the cement for them. We came and we did Bible Study together, we talked about our lives and our stories in the van while they took us to places like the reformed Presbyterian seminary in Matanzas, my great grandmother's hometown. We learned the story of this little old man who could barely talk or walk. A young boy who was with us that week shared this older man's story- Joseph. Joseph had been a member of the church since he was a baby, and he grew up in this church in Santa Clara. When he was a grown man, the church was struggling—they didn't even have a pastor anymore because the communists had taken over and it was illegal to be a Christian. He would walk to church at that time and have worship—sometimes with only two other people, but he made sure the doors were open. He would walk miles to open that door, even in inclimate weather. To make it a place that Glorified God even when it threatened his life.

I admit that it was hard for me—I felt a lot of guilt eating what was in my opinion the best rice and beans in town. I felt like I was almost on a vacation when they took me to their churches and we had a night of dancing and fellowship in the Christian education building.

I had to DO something for them. I was itching to do something in the beginning of the week. I felt so spoiled. And pampered. And useless, like an empty broken clay pot. But those people—they saw the treasure—we represented to them the glory of God. We were representatives from this church that enabled them to have a space to teach and to fellowship—we represented this deep relationship that the spirit of God connected. They saw God through us. Just us, not what we did that week, but who we were.

The people came to serve Omar, Joseph, Clara, Mattias, Julia, Miguel, Miss Clarita, Pastor...

That week completely transformed my understanding of serving God because I was not *doing* anything like building a wall. I was allowing the spirit to do something in me, by building a relationship. Our job that week was to *receive* hospitality from these people who barely had much to give, but they were content with what God had blessed them. We were a chapter in God's grand story of it all. But I wanted to feel like I accomplished something!

Sometimes we want to do good and serve God out of the gratitude we have—and it is in good intention, but we can easily get so concerned about our service that we miss the target—the focus becomes about us and our need to have something right or our need to help someone, or our need to finish the project, and forget that we are the instruments of God's peace, not the operators. It is so easy to find ourselves worried about the *quality* of service we do—like it would perhaps *need* to be *enough* for us as servants.

Today we are sending folks off for a mission trip. Those whom we commissioned share a common goal, not to be served but to serve. Those of us here in the pews are in some sense leaving commissioned as well like we are every week—sent by God to serve in the world.

WE ARE ALL COMMISSIONED

Last week I asked you how God might be molding you or shaping you in your life—This week I invite you take a different spin on that thought—How might the spirit be shaping you SO THAT God might be glorified through you?

The bowl I have been using the past two weeks is Bill Kephart's begging bowl. It has some personal significance and I am grateful that he lent me his favorite piece of pottery so that we could experience Paul's letter in a new light. A begging bowl I mainly used in the Buddhist religion for monks. While there are a variety of uses and symbolism, the one I am struck by is that of almsgiving. Buddhist monks take a vow of poverty and take monetary gifts from people to survive- this idea that God provides all that you will need to survive.

I have this image when I think of a begging bowl as someone that would be kneeling with the bowl in their hands. Waiting for the bowl to be filled with something--

I want us to think about that image for ourselves. How can we make space in our relationship with God that we are like these monks. Sitting in a prostrate and vulnerable position, waiting for that treasure to fill our bowl that invites us to serve God in a new way? How might we be waiting on the spirit to fill our earthen vessels inviting us to glorify God through our very existence?

Benediction

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent
enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of
saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.
No prayer fully expresses our faith.
No confession brings perfection.
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.
This is what we are about.
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.
We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an
opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master
builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.