

"Why Pay Attention to the Bible? Because of clay jars"

Sermon Preached at Foundry United Methodist Church
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II Corinthians 4:7-15

John 14:8-14

The Apostle Paul is writing about the glory of God, the glory of God that he experiences in his life, the glory of God that he has seen in the face of Jesus Christ. *Glory, glory, glory*, he writes.

And then he stops - and he slows down and takes a minute to explain. What he says to his readers is this: *Don't be confused. I'm not talking about myself. I'm not glorious. And if you looked at the circumstances of my life, they won't look very glorious to you.*

The Apostle Paul, had to stop and explain this because people, so often, when they met Paul, were so disappointed.

The Apostle Paul was almost an embarrassment to the early church. He was the father of Asian and African and European Christianity, but he was almost an embarrassment to the early church.

The Apostle Paul would go to a new community, where there was no church, and he'd begin a congregation. He'd gather maybe three or four families, the nucleus of a church, and when he had taught them and formed them into a congregation, he would leave. Then, the little house church that he had left behind would grow and new people would join and become followers of Jesus Christ.

These new people, who had never met Paul, would hear stories about the Apostle Paul - how he had taught the congregation about Jesus, how he had cared about them, how he had chastised them like a father when they had done things that were wrong! Paul would send them letters - and these Christians - new Christians - would hear the Apostle Paul's letters read in church as though they were sermons. Every word of his letters would be discussed and pondered.

They heard so much about the Apostle Paul. Then, one day, Paul would return to town or they would go somewhere to hear the Apostle Paul in person. They would go to actually hear the great man himself speak, and there he would be - old, sick, bent-over - wearing the clothes of a tentmaker, working clothes.

When he spoke, his voice was weak. He was no orator, the Apostle Paul. He was no great speaker. Because of his illness - the thorn in his side - when he spoke, he coughed. He was not a very impressive presence.

And, he wasn't a particularly nice old man either - sort of ornery, gruff, impatient. Nobodies beloved old grandfatherly type.

And so, the Apostle Paul knew that one of the questions that people were asking in the early church was, How could this man - weak and bent-over and sickly - be an example of the power of Christ, for God's sake? How could this man illustrate anything about the glory of God?

So the Apostle Paul says, Don't be confused. You're not going to see the glory of God in the way I look, or

the way I dress, or the way I speak, or even in the way I behave. Because the treasure that we have is in clay jars - it's in clay pots.

The Message - Eugene Peterson's translation of the Bible - puts what the Apostle Paul says this way: "We carry this precious Message around in the unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives."

The unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives.

The reason for this, the Apostle Paul adds, is so that you will never confuse the power of God with me. Clearly what is happening here is not a result of me being wise or articulate, or a great man. What's happening here is clearly a manifestation of the extraordinary power of God.

Charles Spurgeon was a great and successful evangelist. When he preached in London throngs of people came to hear him. Multitudes made commitments of their lives to Jesus Christ and to the church under his preaching. One day, a very affluent man asked to meet with him and told him that he wanted to make a very large contribution to his ministry. Spurgeon thanked him and then asked him why he had decided to support his ministry so generously. The man said he had heard Spurgeon preach.

Spurgeon asked whether his sermon had convince the man to support his ministry so generously. The man answered, "Well, in a sense."

"There was nothing very special about your sermon," the man told Spurgeon. "You are not a great orator. When I saw the way that people responded, I figured that the only explanation for this must be the Holy Spirit because nothing else made any sense to me."

The Apostle Paul is saying, *You are right. Look at me. Look at the circumstances of my life. Look at my personality. None of this is very convincing or winsome - and the reason is so that none of you might be confused about where this power comes from. It comes not from me. It comes not from us. It comes from the spirit of God.*

I keep in my library, a little book entitled "Defending Slavery." The book includes fifteen essays written before the Civil War by very wise and impressive Americans defending the institution of slavery. Among the fifteen articles, there is an essay by the Rev. Thorton Stringfellow, of Culpepper County, Virginia, entitled "A Scriptural View of Slavery."

Rev. Stringfellow argues that the Bible supports the institution of slavery. He argues that the Bible clearly shows that slavery was instituted by God during the time of Abraham, that Jesus Christ assumed and accepted the existence of slavery, and the Apostle Paul endorsed it. I keep this little book in my library in order to remind myself how easy it is for any of us to misunderstand and misinterpret the Bible.

The writers of the Bible were clay pots. If you assume -- as Rev. Stringfellow did - that the Bible is a book in which every word is true, it is easy to miss the message. Just like I'm a clay pot, and you're a clay pot and this church is a clay pot - the Bible itself is a clay pot. The writers of the Bible often assumed the cultural norms of the time . The Bible is not a book in which every word is true. The Bible is the revelation of the power of God manifested in the midst of our human imperfections.

The Bible is not a perfect book written by perfect writers. The Bible is a book about the power of God revealed in the midst of the story of imperfect men and women. So that we will not be confused about where the power comes from, the Word of God is carried within the clay pots of the biblical writings.

If you look at the life of the Apostle Paul, by any objective standards - and I'm going to say this as bluntly as I can - by any standards, the life of the Apostle Paul sucked. There is no one in all creation who would

envy the Apostle Paul. There is no one who would envy him his health. There is no one who would envy him his personality. There is no one who would envy his physical condition or his spiritual condition or his intellectual condition.

The Apostle Paul says about his own life that he is afflicted in every way - emotionally and physically. He is perplexed. He doesn't have a clear understanding about much of life. He doesn't have a crystal clear theology. He is perplexed. He is persecuted, and he is struck down.

By anybody else's estimation, Paul's life is the pits, but his failure, his fallibility, his imperfection, his oppressed circumstances are a manifestation of the power of God. God uses the very miseries and failures in his life to demonstrate God's extraordinary power - because even though, even though I'm afflicted, he says, I'm not crushed. Even though I'm confused and perplexed about the circumstances of my life, Paul says, I am not in despair. Even though I'm persecuted, he says, I am not forsaken. Even though I'm struck down and weak, he says, I am not destroyed.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that the most effective way to avoid living out our Christian discipleship is by choosing instead to live in a fantasy world of wish-dreams. We put off life in the real world as it is by wishing and dreaming that our lives were different. If our lives were in some way different, then we would be able to live faithfully and fully in service to God and others and self the way we ought to live.

If only I were smarter. If only I were thinner. If only I were better looking. If only I were more articulate. If only I weren't so old. If only I had more money. If only I had a better job. If only I'd partnered up with someone else. If only I had my health back. If only I didn't need to retire yet - If only I were a man. If only I weren't gay. If only my parents hadn't been the way they'd been. If only ... If only ... If only ...

But, the Apostle Paul says that the very way that God has placed us in life is the way the power of God can be revealed. The power of God is revealed through the very things about us that we deplore, the very things that we're embarrassed about, the very things that we wish so much were somehow different. The unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives are the places where God has an opportunity to reveal God's power.

Phillip spoke out on behalf of all the disciples when Jesus was telling them that he was about to die and to be resurrected and leave this earth. Phillip suddenly seemed to realize that he and the other disciples have never really understood what Jesus was about. Most of them had thought Jesus was going to oust the oppressive Roman government and establish an earthly kingdom. But, now, apparently not.

So Phillip says to Jesus, *Just tell us this one thing - show us the father - tell us what the point of all of this is - give us something so that we'll know what the point of all this is. Give us the answer in the back of the book. Tell us the punchline.*

Jesus says to Phillip, "If you've seen me, you've seen the father." *This is it. There's no other secrets. There's no other wisdom. There's no other skills. There's no other gifts. There's nothing else but what you've seen in me. But, if you're willing to believe in me and follow me, you will do the things I did and even greater things will you do.*

When we try to make the Bible a perfect book, in the hopes that we can follow its every word and become perfect people living perfect lives, we miss the point.

The Bible is an imperfect book, written by imperfect people, so that it might reveal the extraordinary power of God. We are imperfect people, so that we can reveal the extraordinary power of God working through our imperfect personalities and our imperfect lives and our imperfect churches.

The imperfect people who wrote the Bible assumed that slavery was part of the human condition. Because

they assumed this, they wrote as though slavery were a God-ordained thing. But in the midst of their imperfect and limited assumptions, which are reflected in their imperfect writings, there is the story of Exodus. When the Bible writers wrote about the Exodus, even they themselves did not understand the implications of what had happened. But every enslaved people since who have heard the story of the Exodus have understood that God is working with extraordinary power to liberate oppressed peoples.

The Apostle Paul, a couple millennium after the Exodus, caught a glimpse of it when he wrote that in Jesus Christ there is neither slave nor free. But even imperfect Paul did not fully understand.

And we don't understand fully either, you and I. If we understood perfectly, there would be no room for the extraordinary power of God. If we were a perfect people with a perfect book, there would not be room for the extraordinary power of God to be manifested.

Your and my imperfect life, in which we imperfectly study and pray to discern the extraordinary power of God in our midst, is that way we are meant to be. Your and my imperfect circumstances are meant to be. Your and my failures are meant to be, so that in the midst of our imperfections, God might be able to demonstrate the most extraordinary power of love.

I pay attention to the Bible because it is a clay pot that holds great treasure - a glimpse of the extraordinary power of God ... the extraordinary power of God that is still at work in my imperfect little life and yours.