

**Treasure in Clay Jars
2 Corinthians 4: 5-12
Don Lincoln**

I still recall the tennis match. It was 1991. Jimmy Connors was playing Michael Chang in the French Open. Connors – one of the greatest tennis players of his day – (and his day included Bjorn Borg, Ili Nastase and John McEnroe) – Connors was known for his antics, clowning with the ball boys, talking to his racket when he had a wayward shot–entertaining everyone. But, he was known for being INCREDIBLY GOOD on the tennis court. The only man ever to win more than 100 tennis titles.

But late in that 1991, very competitive, back-and-forth match, tied at two sets apiece, Connors hobbled off the court after the first point of the fifth set, after 3 hours and 34 minutes of play and said to the umpire, “I’m sorry, I just can’t play anymore.”

Connors had to be helped to the locker room by his trainer. He was exhausted; his back was in tremendous pain and had stiffened up. The announcer commented about his being 38 years old, and age was simply catching up to him. I can’t remember being young enough to think that age could catch up with you at 38!

But last weekend when putting up a new mailbox post, I realized at 63, it was smarter for me to get help at the Home Depot picking up the 50 pound bag of concrete mix. When did that happen?

We have this treasure in clay jars. Clay jars are utilitarian. Useful. But susceptible to chipping. Cracking. Breaking. Fragile enough that eventually those clay jars may no longer be worth repairing. Most of us know folks who will tell us the golden years ain’t always so golden.

Here’s the context for this word about clay jars. The congregation in Corinth had come under the influence of some teachers who had little regard for Paul. They claimed a certain “status” or “authority” among the community of believers; for this reason they drew a straight line from faithfulness to positions of influence, prestige and power. To be faithful was to be a winner! And you and I thought the “prosperity Gospel” was a recent invention! They didn’t think much of Paul.

Reluctantly, Paul engages them in their own game of one-upsmanship. He didn’t like talking about himself or his ministry in this way; he called himself a fool for being drawn into this kind of talk – but he wanted his friends in Corinth to understand something about faithful commitment to Jesus. And what that meant in one’s life.

So Paul makes his boast in this letter to the Corinthians and he does so by pointing to his afflictions, moments of weakness, the raw side of servanthood. "Here's my resume," Paul told them. "Constant danger, toil and hardship . . . sleepless nights . . . often without food . . . shipwrecked . . . three times beaten with rods . . . cold and exposure."¹ But for Paul it is his very weakness that validates his authority. It is in such fragile clay vessels that the treasure is carried. The suffering, rejection, and struggle – all that seems to diminish Paul as a human leader – actually serves to reveal the extraordinary power of God.² The light in the darkness.

Cheap earthenware vessels that we may be, you and I have the eternal power of God contained within – a treasure that is not corruptible, that moths and rust and age and time cannot destroy. The renewing, life-giving power of Jesus Christ, who was victorious over all death and corruption.

A colleague tells of reading this text at the memorial service for a friend named Dolores. She was a woman with whom he had worked for more than thirty years. She was a bright, brilliant, even energetic person – **except when she wasn't**. Her life had been punctuated by four shattering psychotic episodes. Dolores lived with bi-polar illness.

Dolores knew whereof Paul spoke. She knew affliction, perplexity, persecution, and being laid low. Which also meant she had every reason to give up on faith, even life. She never did.

He says that in reading this passage in her service, through the lens of Dolores' life, he says, "**I got it!** It is the ringing note of defiance in Paul's words. Afflicted, **but not crushed** . . . perplexed, **but not driven to despair** . . . persecuted, **but not forsaken** . . . struck down, **but not destroyed**. Each phrase a kind of holy "dangit!" A shout of resurrection defiance in the face of harsh reality."³ Down, but not out!

Afflicted; perplexed; persecuted; struck down – those words could describe things internal, external, physical, emotional, spiritual. You can hang on those four words almost any brokenness that is in this room right now – addiction, depression, abuse, physical disease, the ravages of age, gluttony, temptation – all of them could be hung on those four phrases. But Paul declares that while any of those things can knock us down, they cannot, they will not take us out.

Some of us have heard of Paul's "thorn in the flesh". Some ailment; some affliction; some disturbance; some temptation that Paul prayed and prayed and prayed for God to remove from his life. But it never was. I grow more and more appreciative that God didn't let Paul tell us what that thorn was – so that each of us, in our own affliction, our own clay-potness, can identify with Paul in weakness. And, so we can do exactly what Paul does when he feels it.

For the recognition of human weakness for Paul always brings the opportunity to boast about God. The vitality of our lives does not spring up from our own ability or dedication, but from the transcendent power of God at work in us. For although the earthen pot is fragile, what God gives us, what God does in us and through us is never able to be defeated, crushed, stopped or destroyed.

After all, Jesus, too, had His treasure in a clay pot; able to be struck down, but not destroyed. Rather, he was raised up for the power and purpose of God in the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. Still Speaking, devotional on 2 Corinthians 11.
2. Eugene Teselle, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3.
3. Tony Robinson, Still-Speaking, May 25, 2016