

2 Corinthians 4:5-7;14-15 "For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. [And] we have this treasure in jars of clay. . . We believe, and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God."

A Treasure in Jars of Clay

Sometimes the greatest and most valuable treasures can be found in the most unlikely containers.

The year was 1947. A young shepherd in southern Palestine was climbing the cliffs overlooking the Dead Sea, looking for a few goats that had wandered away from his herd. There in the cliffs overlooking the lake the shepherd stumbled onto a small cave. Inside he was surprised at what he found. In the dim light of the cave he saw several large, plain clay jars – the kind of jars commonly used in ancient times to store water or food. But there in those plain, unremarkable containers he found one of the most important archeological discoveries of the century. Inside those jars were scrolls --handwritten copies of the books of the Old Testament -- the oldest copies of the Bible known to exist at that time, now known as the Dead Sea scrolls. Truly it was a treasure in jars of clay; a valuable treasure in a most unlikely, unworthy container.

A starving woman in Africa sits and watches the huge green plane being unloaded. On pallets are stacks and stacks of bulging sacks made of plain brown cloth -- containers not beautiful or valuable in themselves. But plain containers containing a real treasure --the grain that will keep her and her family alive. A treasure in an unlikely, even unworthy, container.

A man is pulled from the rubble days after an earthquake; he's dying of thirst. He is offered a drink of water from a dented, dirty metal canteen. The container is plain, ugly, inexpensive. But the man doesn't notice. Inside is the treasure that will give him life.

The apostle Paul uses that very same kind of illustration to describe another kind of treasure carried in plain ordinary containers. The treasure is nothing less than the gospel -- the good news of a Savior who has redeemed a world of sinners. And those who carry the gospel and share the Word of God with others are the clay jars —containers you could say -- not beautiful or valuable in themselves, but important and vital because of the treasure they carry. As valuable as those scrolls were, they would not have survived 2,000 years without those plain jars holding them. As important and necessary as that grain was, the food would not have made it to the starving family without the sacks to ship it in. As crucial as the water was for the man dying of thirst, it could not have been given to him without that dented canteen. So the gospel of Jesus -- the good news, the vital and precious news of life and forgiveness and salvation--needs to be preached and proclaimed and carried to a world dying in sin by people – people who are the clay jars who are privileged to carry a priceless treasure -- whom God has chosen to be the containers.

It's true that God wants all of us to be people who carry the gospel wherever we go. Sharing our faith will be a natural part of living our lives as Christians. God has called all of us to be his witness, his messengers, the vessels that carry his good news. God not only all of us to be his witness; he also needs people who will be able to do that work full time as ministers of the gospel, as pastors and staff ministers in our congregations and as teachers in our Lutheran schools. We can't place emphasize enough the importance of all of the young people in this congregation to consider prayerfully whether they might someday become pastors or teachers in our church. This is an especially timely issue, since our synod is entering a crucial time in which it is becoming more and more difficult to find young people willing to train for the ministry—young men who will become pastors to fill pulpits like this one and young men and women who will become teachers to fill classrooms like those in your school. It is an issue that touches every congregation. That touches you and your children, and your grandchildren.

And so what the apostle Paul says today will apply to you children, because you are the future of our church. You will be the containers whom God will use to carry his gospel to the next generation of people here in Watertown, in America, and throughout the world.

Paul's words will also speak to you parents, because you will play a very vital role not only in teaching your children to know and believe and serve their Savior, but you will be instrumental in helping them and guiding them in their plans for the rest of their lives.

And Paul's words speak also to you, the members of St. Mark's and the important supporting role you play in giving the sons and daughters of your congregation for full time service in God's church. Because this congregation and many other like it will need to have pastors and teachers to continue to bring to you and to your children this greatest treasure.

To all of us there is an important message when Paul says, ***"We have this treasure in jars of clay."***

All of us are people who know well why Paul calls the gospel a treasure. You and I know from God Word that we are sinners. And you don't need me to stand here and describe the ways that you and I have rebelled against God. We know all too well of those times that we have not put God first in our lives; when we have failed to pray and neglected our worship; times when we have dishonored and disobeyed our parents and teachers; times when we have hurt others by our actions or our words, when we have had hearts filled with wicked thoughts and even acted out those desires. We all know well the times we have gossiped about and slandered others; the times we have been dissatisfied with what we have and worried about the future. You and I know that we are sinners. And we know that God says that the soul that sins shall die.

But you and I also know the grace of our God. We know his love that sought us out to make us his own. We know the love that moved him to send his Son Jesus, to live and die for each of us. And we know the joy of his forgiveness, the comfort of his word, the hope from his promises, and the victory of his resurrection. Those are treasures that nothing can compare with and that no one can take from us. When God says to you, "My son, my daughter, be filled with joy, your sins are forgiven. Your salvation is won. You eternity is secure."

We need that precious treasure of his Gospel every day. And the world--now seemingly more than ever--needs that treasure too. It's a world that is caught in a growing and deepening darkness, as morality disappears and people seem to have less and less time for God and for things that really matter. And if we are going to continue to have that precious treasure, if your congregation and others like it are going to continue to hear the gospel preached and taught, and if we are going to change the world with that message, then we need people who will be willing to dedicate their lives to serving as containers as carriers of that gospel. We need pastors and teachers who will continue to bring us that message of life, that greatest of all treasures. As Paul says, this is vital ***so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God."***

Young people, now is the time to begin thinking about whether you could serve to carry the gospel to others, as a pastor or teacher. Now, your first reaction may be to offer a number of objections to that idea. You may think, "I'm not qualified to be a pastor or teacher. I'm not strong enough in my faith to be a full time church worker. And I don't know if I even want to do that." If that is what you're thinking I would invite you to think of some of the many messengers of God described in the Bible. Not one that I can remember thought of himself as especially qualified or worthy to serve God. Moses was filled with doubt and fear when God called him. Jeremiah claimed he was young and inexperienced and wouldn't know what to say. Jonah hopped on a boat and sailed in the wrong direction because he felt he wasn't up to the task of preaching God's Word. The Apostle Paul described himself as the chief of sinners, someone totally unworthy to be called an apostle. No wonder Paul described himself and every messenger of God as a clay jar--a container not special in itself--but one which God himself used to carry his message of life.

You, too, may feel unqualified to serve as a pastor or teacher. But that's why our church has worker training schools--special high schools, colleges, and a seminary, in which young Christians like your are trained in the

skills needed for ministry. You may feel that you are not worthy. But you know the same grace of God and have the same faith in Jesus that people like Paul and Jeremiah had. You may not be convinced that this is what you want to do. But you have the opportunity to go to a school in which you will be encouraged to consider and pray about whether God may someday use you.

Parents, you have a very special role in this whole matter. You would not be here today if you didn't value God's Word for yourself and for your children. You know how important God's Word is for yourself and for them every day. I would hope that you also see the importance of sending your children to a high school where God's Word is the focus and foundation of all education. a school whose primary purposes is to use that Word to prepare young people to be lay leaders in the church, or to prepare and encourage young people for full time ministry. These high school years are going to be some of the most important years in your children's lives. They will be facing pressures and influences from every direction. Sadly so many parents say, We will let our son or daughter decide for themselves where they will go to school. Isn't that much too important a decision for you not to make?

And what about your role as parents in helping your children to decide on a career? Very few pastors and teachers today got there without the strong encouragement of their parents. Do you let your children know how proud you would be if they became pastors or teachers?

And what about your role, members of St. Mark's, in encouraging young people for ministry? We can make recruitment for ministry one of the highest goals and priorities of our congregation. You can hold annual Sundays in which you emphasize the importance of recruiting young people to train for the ministry. We can establish special scholarship funds to help families who send their children to worker training schools. We can take the time to talk to those young people now at one of those schools, offering a word of encouragement and letting them know that you are proud of them. We can go a long way in recruiting for ministry by the honor and respect and love that you show to the pastors and teachers who serve you.

God needs workers -- clay jars though they are -- to carry his message. But I would wouldn't want to talk about the need and importance of this ministry without also talking about some of the joys and privileges that pastors and teachers experience.

It is true that you will not get rich if you become as pastor or teacher. Most likely you will not become famous. Contrary to what some people say, pastors do not just work one hour on Sunday morning and Lutheran teachers do not have the whole summer free. The hours are long and the pressures are real.

But I can also say this. There is no other work that compares to the joy and fulfillment of the public ministry. I have had the privilege of serving in the pastoral ministry for 25 years. I can tell you from personal experience that there is no higher honor than being able to wash away a little baby's sins in baptism; or to be able to announce God's forgiveness to a church full of people, or to a single lonely shut in; or to assure people of their forgiveness by sharing with them the body and blood of Christ in communion. No amount of money could ever replace the feeling that comes when you hear a little child that you have taught sing Jesus loves me this I know. No other work could compare to the feeling of pride when a pastor hears young Christians confess their faith at their confirmation. There is nothing quite like the experience of seeing the eyes of a person who, through your instruction, has come to know the love and forgiveness of Jesus for the very first time in his life. There is nothing like having someone come out of church and say, "Pastor, your sermon was just what I needed to hear today, Thank you!" There is nothing so fulfilling as leading a group of people in the study of God's word and watching them grow in their faith. There is certainly no other profession in which you can sit at the side of a cancer patient and watch how the comfort and power of God's Word can overcome the fear and ravages of disease. And there is nothing like being with a child of God who is about to close his eyes in death, knowing, knowing that in a moment he will be with his Savior.

Dear friends, we have a special treasure. A treasure that needs to be valued, but a treasure that needs to be shared and proclaimed. Who will be the ones to carry that treasure? Who will be the ones to preach and teach that good news to a dying world? It's my prayer that it will be you. Clay jars, simple containers not special in themselves, but containers which carry the greatest treasure the world will ever know. Amen.