

Proper 27A  
Veterans/Stewardship  
Peace, Seattle  
November 12, 2017  
2 Cor 4:1, 6-11

## **WHAT ARE WE FORMED FOR?**

“The Romans had a serious trash problem, though by our standards it was good-looking trash. Their problem was amphorae.<sup>1</sup> They needed millions of [these] curvy clay jars to ship wine, olive oil, and fish sauce around the empire, and often they didn’t recycle their empties.”

“Sometimes they didn’t even bother to pop the cork—it was quicker to saber the neck...drain the thing, then chuck it. In Rome there’s a five-acre, 160-foot-high hill, Monte Testaccio, that consists entirely of shattered [clay jars].”

“In 1<sup>st</sup> Century Arles, a Roman city on the Rhône River in what’s now southern France, [the dock workers] did things a bit differently: They threw their empties into the river.”

In Arles today, all that remains from the heavy trade traffic during the empire is a shadow in the riverbed—a thick stripe of Roman era trash.

But in 2004 a diver looking for archaeological riches noticed a mass of wood swelling up from the riverbed. It turned out to be the side of a 102-foot-long barge nearly intact. Most of it was still buried under the layers of mud and [clay jars] that had sheltered it for nearly 2,000 years. Somehow it had managed to hold on to its last cargo, and through a further series of small miracles, emerged from the trash heap to resume its last voyage—safe this time in a new wing of the Arles Antiquities Museum.

As we observe Veterans Sunday today, we’re also beginning a two-part focus on stewardship under the theme: Re-formation, and the question we’re inviting reflection on is:

### **WHAT ARE WE FORMED FOR?**

Our theme verse for this two-part series comes from Paul’s 2nd letter to the Corinthians, the fourth chapter, where he writes:

Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart... For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

### **My shorthand translation of verse 7: We carry the gospel treasure in the clay jars of our lives.**

Ancient pots like those that were found in that sunken boat at Arles, and like others at archeological sites around the world, offer tangible evidence of cultures from the past. And when properly read and interpreted, they can tell us much about the economy, the diet, the habits, and the priorities of the people who once used them.

**Enduring through the millennia, their discovery allows the stories of ancient peoples to be told.**

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted, with some editing, from an article by Robert Kunzig, *Romans in France: An ancient wreck tells the tale of Romans in France*. *National Geographic*, April 2014. <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2014/04/roman-boat/kunzig-text>

**The question we begin pondering today is: What kind of vessel are you?**

And what does the vessel you have been formed to be communicate to others about your values, your priorities, your Maker?

**Paul calls us “clay jars” or “earthen vessels.” Clay jars are not hermetically sealed, stainless steel containers. They’re not immune from cracks and dings. They have vulnerabilities.**

**In fact, there seems to be an innate vulnerability that comes with being human.**

We mess up; we develop fractures; we leak. We fail to live up to our own expectations and to the expectations of others. We fall short of our God-given potential. We miss the mark.

**The stories from Genesis tells us that this has been the case almost from the beginning.**

To be human is to carry within ourselves the ability to choose both good and evil; to orient our lives inwardly toward self and ego, and to orient ourselves toward the needs of others.

There’s no question that built into our DNA is a propensity to do what it takes to survive. And yet, new evidence tells us there is also an element engineered into our DNA which values the willingness to sacrifice self for the larger good—what some scientists have named the “altruism gene.”

**When it comes to being human we are indeed fragile, clay jars. But despite this—perhaps even because of it says Paul—God has chosen us as the vessels in whom the gospel message of the crucified One is borne to the world.**

**The question, WHAT ARE WE FORMED FOR? invites each one of us to ponder our vocation seriously.**

We just heard from Amy about the ministry of formation that takes place at camps like Lutherwood. Through relationships, through encounters with God’s word, through shared experiences and challenges, young people grow in awareness of their gifts and abilities as well as the rough edges that come with living in community, and all this is tremendously formative.

The Family Sunday School program we’ve launched this year is all about supporting and encouraging families and households to be places where the faith of children is formed and nourished; places where earthen vessels can be shaped to more fully embody the gifts God calls us to be in the world: to trust God, love our neighbor, do justice, and live generously.

These processes of formation, which flow straight from our baptismal covenant, can never be minimized.

Over the past year we’ve lost two more veterans from our midst: Bob Evetts and Claude Thompson. We also lost another friend and neighbor, Navy veteran—Al Skaret.

Al and his wife Jean were founding members of Hillcrest and participated with many others putting “sweat equity” into building that church community.

The congregation voted to sell their building and relocate around the same time that Jean died, and so Al began worshipping here on occasion and participating in some of our events.

At a men’s breakfast gathering two years ago he shared one of his formative experiences, a crisis that unfolded while he served on the aircraft carrier the USS Bunker Hill during WW2.

On May 11, 1945, two kamikaze pilots in a coordinated strike, tried to take out the Bunker Hill. In the process, 346 men were killed, 43 went missing and another 264 were wounded, and the ship became very damaged.<sup>2</sup>

Al was working on the ship's deck at the time, and survived the initial attack. As part of a damage-control unit he began working with a lieutenant moving about the burning ship to help rescue survivors who'd been trapped below deck. The smoke was so thick they couldn't see their hands in front of their faces, but they put on masks rated for 1 hour of breathing, and began searching the below for survivors.

Al didn't expect to find anyone alive, but then he heard a pounding sound. By the time he got the hatch opened, fellow sailor Norm Lasman was unconscious, and Al called on another searcher to help carry Lasman to safety, then Al continued the search.<sup>3</sup>

Separated from his partner and unable to see, with his breathing mask fast approaching its operational limit, **Al found himself lost and cried out to God in a desperate prayer: LORD, HELP!**

Reaching out, he took one step forward and felt the rung of a ladder. He knew at that moment God had provided a way out. As he looked up, he saw what looked like the MOON shining above him at the top of the ladder. Climbing up, he discovered it was a sailor with a lantern.

"The lieutenant came out a long time ago," the sailor said, "and he told me to stay here until you came out."

Al had other stories of near misses he'd survived. After more sharing, he reflected with us: "Maybe God has a mission for me. Maybe that's why I'm alive. Maybe my mission is to love my neighbor (who is kind of reclusive, etc.)."

Al Skaret was able to reflect theologically on his experience on the Bunker Hill because he had been brought up in a faith community that took those kinds of reflections seriously. That formation followed him his whole life through.

**What are you formed for?** Because we are earthen vessels, it's clear that the power to carry on God's mission—whatever that mission may be—originates with God and not with us.

**Yet God uses us—fragile, vulnerable clay jars that we are!**

And as perplexed as we may become when confronted with the cruelties of this world. As close to despair as we may be when news of yet another mass shooting fractures our world, our crucified and risen Lord closes the gap between us and through the power of his risen life sustains our hope and renews our purpose.

**What are you formed for? How will Christ be manifested in your life?**

Whatever your answer, Christ wants to be your faithful companion, guiding your feet, strengthening your witness, as you share the gospel treasure within the earthen vessel of your life. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> The ship was so damaged that it later earned the title "most damaged ship to survive during the war," according to Mr. Skaret. The story is captured in the book *Danger's Hour* by Maxwell Kennedy.

<sup>3</sup> Lasman said since he was unconscious he never knew who saved his life. But after reading a history of the attack called *Danger's Hour*, he was inspired to try and find if Al Skaret was still alive. The two eventually began exchanging letters, and WGN had the privilege of re-uniting the pair via Skype, helping them meet face-to-face for the first time after being separated by 2,100 miles and 72 years. Skaret and Lasman became friends and spoke often. Skaret's son said the best days of his dad's life were the day he got married, the day his kids were born, and the day the news crews shared his story. <http://wgntv.com/2017/10/06/wwii-veteran-who-saved-sailor-from-u-s-s-bunker-hill-dies-at-97/>