

Proper 4B
Peace, Seattle
June 3, 2018
2 Corinthians 4:5-12

EARTHEN VESSELS

Eva had worked a long time on that single piece. Evening after evening she'd placed herself at the wheel, working the clay over and over and over again until it gave her what she sought.

Around and around the wheel had gone as she tried to create something that would speak from her heart to theirs....a vessel whose form and shape and colors would tell the story of her love for them.

Though their wedding date was still over a month away, Eva knew as soon as they announced their plans to marry that she would make them something special. It would be a labor of love for Jan and Mikal, two of her dearest friends.

And finally, it rose up from the potter's wheel—the exact shape she was looking for, and it was impressive! Cutting it off the wheel, she placed it carefully on the drying rack where it would await its first firing.

A few weeks later, Eva opened the kiln with great anticipation. She took out the small pieces first—mugs and bowls and little vases—until finally she could reach the one she'd been waiting for. Gingerly she pulled it out. And then, her face fell.

In the intense heat of the kiln, the earthen pot she'd fashioned with such care and skill and love had developed a crack along its rim. She knew instantly there would be no way to repair it. That was that. There was nothing she could do.

This sort of thing had happened to her dozens of times before, of course, as it does to every potter. But why did it have to be now? And why this piece? Why not one of the mugs or plates? They were a dime a dozen. But no, it was her prize piece. Her wedding gift. And it was ruined.

She couldn't bring herself to throw it away, at least not yet. And so she put it over in a corner of her workshop, and there it stayed.

After a few days of mourning, Eva turned her attention back to Jan and Mikal's gift. This time, she sighed, she would be practical—she'd make them four matching sets of tableware.

The wedding day arrived and everything came off beautifully. Jan and Mikal loved the dishes, especially the colorful glaze Eva had chosen. It was a gift they would remember—and use.

As the months went by, turning into years, the “perfect marriage” of Jan and Mikal proved to be, like so many others, less than perfect, as the young couple dealt with the financial pressure of buying a home and the emotional stress of holding down multiple jobs to make it affordable.

It was difficult not to assign blame for the emptiness they began to feel.

Eva knew that things weren't going very well for her friends, but she felt quite helpless about it all. She could—and did—listen; but she wished she could do more.

Then, one evening, after having a long heart-to-heart with Jan about marriage, relationships, and expectations, Eva went down to her workshop. It was late, but after their conversation she had to work some clay.

As she began, Eva's eyes glanced to the corner of the room where she saw, in the same place she had put it four years before, the cracked vessel she'd hoped would be Jan and Mikal's wedding gift.

She turned her attention to the wheel, but soon found her eyes gravitating again toward the pot in the corner. It seemed to be drawing her. Getting up from the wheel Eva went to get the jar.

During the past four years it had become a depository of sorts for all the unfinished pieces, all the broken dreams, which her hands had fashioned but which had met their demise one way or another before completion.

What had begun as a token from one broken vase had become a kind of ritual as, over the months, she took a small piece from each broken work and tossed it into the large jar like an offering.

Now that jar was calling to her. She picked it up, emptied out the shards and then sat down with it. Placing it on the wheel, she turned it slowly around. Yes, the crack was still there, but the rest of the pot was still unblemished.

An idea flashed through Eva's mind—and smiling to herself, she picked up the jar and went quickly to the glazing table, where she worked long into the night to finally complete what she had begun four years before.

At last she was going to give Jan and Mikal the gift she had intended for them, only instead of for their wedding, it would be for the occasion of their fourth anniversary; and instead of being absolutely perfect this earthen vessel would be self-consciously flawed.

A week later, after hosting them for a special anniversary dinner, Eva presented Jan and Mikal with her treasure.

She told them the story of the jar—

- How she'd labored in love to create it for them;
- How disappointed she had been when she discovered the crack after the first firing.
- How it sat in the corner of her potshop becoming a depository for all the unfinished hopes and dreams of her hands.
- And finally, how this jar, in teaching her to come to terms with the paradox of its simultaneous strength and fragility, had given her an insight into the paradox of human relationship: our expectations and disappointments, our hopes and our fears.

The flawed piece of work had taken on new value, and Evan wanted to pass it—and all it embodied—onto her two dear friends.

Writing to a community with whom he'd experienced a long and difficult relationship, the apostle Paul shares these words:

We carry the good news treasure of Jesus in earthen vessels, to show that the power to transcend our limits originates in God and not in us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our mortal flesh.

We carry the treasure of what God has done and is doing in Jesus in the clay jars of our lives, within the crucible of our stories and relationships. Cracked, chipped, and flawed though they may be, our lives hold the treasure which God intends to bring to all creation!

Isn't it strange that God chooses such humble means as you and me for bringing the Kingdom into being? And yet, that's what God has done. God has chosen us, with all our weaknesses and flaws, to be light-bearers to the nations, and God has asked us to begin right where we are, at home.

How ridiculous is that?! And, yet it's true—this is God's intent—God's design.

In spite of our failed and unfinished natures, God chooses us again and again to be the vessels that carry Jesus to the world—and what a treasure he is!

When darkness comes rushing in, Christ comes fast on its heels, light a-blazing, and we do not lose heart.

When the darker forces of our nature conspire to divide and degrade us, Christ comes to where we lay fractured and broken and turns our versions of death into tales of resurrection.

When we feel misused, beaten down, in danger of splitting apart, just then, Paul says, we become perfect containers for the broken body of our Lord—and his self-giving nature becomes transparently visible in us. **And so, by God's mercy, we do not lose heart.**

Our cracked-pot stories—joined with Jesus in baptism and joined to each other through his dying and rising—are how God works.

Paul knew from his life and ministry, and we all know from ours, what it means to be imperfect—to be vulnerable. But what if we were to view this imperfection NOT as a problem to be overcome— but rather as GOD'S METHOD for getting things done?

What if, as Richard Rohr says, imperfection is “the organizing principle of the entire human spiritual enterprise”; THE FRAMEWORK through which God makes the Godself known and calls us into union?

In the face of Jesus God's light shines and his light becomes our light, a light which is reflected and refracted in all the cracks and fissures of our earthen vessel lives.

By the mercy of God we trust that Christ's light, shining in the darkness, will not be overcome; and that faithful testimony and meaningful ministry are possible.

We bear the gospel treasure in the clay jars of our lives. To know this, is to know joy.
Amen.