

Earthen Vessels

2 Corinthians 4:5-12; Psalms 116:10-15

Sunday, June 16, 2024 at the First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

4th Sunday after Pentecost

2 Corinthians 4:7 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.

- Introduction: Hemingway's Old Man and the Sea: Lots of men need to be useful. When we don't feel like we can to much anymore, that can be a hard thing to take.

I've never been a fan of Ernest Hemmingway, though that opinion is based only on a limited reading of his words. I like Dickens, and thing A Tale of Two Cities is a great novel. It starts out slow, but really picks up after four chapters and, unlike so many other books, the end is the best part. I like Mark Twain, though sometimes I find him a bit cynical. I bring up my opinions of authors because one of Hemmingway's stories, The Old Man and the Sea, has as its theme the feeling of loss when someone feels like they can't be productive anymore; they can't work. It's a lonely feeling, that notion that you really can't do that much, that you once could do many things that were useful and of benefit for other people. Some sort of work that you really like to do. The old man really wasn't able to fish for a living anymore and he didn't know what to do with himself anymore. I don't think that is really such a bad thing. Work, according to the Bible, was not a punishment of the fall of Adam & Eve. They were put to work in the garden before then. Work is not a part of the fallen state, weeds are. What do we do when we can't do what we used to do all the time? When we feel ourselves not as strong as we once were?

- Set the Stage: In 2 Corinthians, Paul describes himself as an "earthen vessel."

In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul describes himself and his compatriots as "earthen vessels," that the "excellence" (lit. hyperbole) of the power may be of God and not of us. It was a well known image. The thinkers of the day often considered the body a case or a cage that kept the soul earth-bound. It was frail and of little value. It was also common practice in mining to melt precious metal, like gold or silver, and pour the molten metal in a container made of earth. Once the metal hardened, the casing could be broken easily. But the image doesn't quite fit the Jewish worldview of the Bible. The earthen vessel, or our mortal bodies, are not just cases or cages for the soul but have value in and of themselves. That's why the Bible speaks of a resurrection body, recognizable yet not susceptible to disease or death. We have earthen vessels for now, but we will get better vessels in the future. Still, for the time being, the apostle is aware that his life is frail and his body is becoming weaker, and he is ok with it.

- Main Point: God works through weak people

cf. excellence vs. earthen vessels

The main point, I think, is that God works through weak people. He is like the person who picks all the worst athletes at a pick-up ball game and still wins the match. That way the focus is not on us but one the One who is the excellence within the follower of Jesus. Did you notice that the "treasure" is not identified in this passage? It could be the Gospel, the most precious of all messages, or the person of the Holy Spirit, the member of the Holy Trinity that lives within people. It could be wisdom of life and of Scripture. It could be all of this and more, but the point for today is that the Lord works through weak vessels. I've heard story after story of people who are home-bound and dependent and yet through prayer touch people and situations around the

world. Something so simple yet so powerful. I believe one of the practical benefits of the promise that nothing can separate us from the love of God is that Satan cannot cut off communication between the Lord and His people.

- Application: If you are weak, that could be a good sign

The application for today could be that if you find yourself to be weak, that could be a good sign. In his prayer life, the Apostle Paul prayed to be relieved of troubles but was told in 2 Corinthians 12:9, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." The Lord not only uses plain, ordinary, weak people, He prefers to do so. I may have mentioned before the story told to me by an Israeli tour guide who spoke of a vision of the final judgment, where all people find themselves on one side of a vast chasm of hell-fire with heaven on the other side. There are two options to cross the chasm. One is a large and impressive stone bridge. The other is a frail, sagging rope bridge that looks like it is made of papier-mâché. But Messiah is there, standing by the frail-looking rope bridge and He is pleading for everyone to cross using His bridge. Once you choose, you must follow through with your decision, there is no going back. Most people chose the large stone bridge only to find there is a gap in the middle over which they must jump. Some jump farther than others, but no one makes it across and all who try to cross over that great stone bridge to heaven end up falling into the fires of hell. Everyone who trusts Messiah takes the weak, sagging rope bridge, and though it looks like it could break at any minute, it holds and everyone who takes the rope bridge makes it to the other side. The Lord uses what is weak because that makes us depend on His strength, not ours.

- Conclusion

The years add up and begin to show on our bodies. We can't always do what we want to do or what we once could do with ease. But in Christ we hold a treasure beyond measure, even if now we use frail earthen vessels. It is ok. The Lord uses who is weak to do great things. Think not of your own weakness, but of His strength.