

“Treasure in Brokenness”
2 Corinthians 4:5-12
Andrew Foster Connors
3rd Sunday in Pentecost
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I’m conflicted when I hear Paul comparing you and me – our lives – to clay jars – “unadorned clay pots” – as one scholar calls it. “Cheap jars.” This is certainly not the assurance that I’ve been giving to my children. We tell them how valuable they are, how precious are their lives, how significant they are to us and to the world. We try to build up their self-esteem. I’ve never called them or anyone else, cheap, clay pots.

Still, Paul’s cheap jars image is more truthful to me than what I’ve been telling my children. Life is not going to last forever. We age. We struggle with loss; with disability and disappointment; with the limits that we come up against in ourselves and in our politics. And following Jesus isn’t going to make us any less fragile. If anything, feeding, and clothing, and loving the poor among us is going to cost you something. Resisting the demonic forces of greed and racism on the rise in our culture, sometimes poisoning our hearts – that’s going to cost you something. Investing your time to strengthen Christ’s body, the church, is going to cost you something.

I think that’s why Paul’s message was challenged, successfully for a time, by so-called “super apostles” who preached a gospel to the Corinthians that seems more appealing. The super apostles taught that real Christian faith comes with dramatic spirituality: with intense feelings, miracles, and revelations from God. That’s what many of us look for from faith – spirituality to overcome the tragedy that is a part of living. Spirituality to lift us out of our doldrums, or out of our circumstances, or out of the reality of our politics. It’s why some of us feel pressured into explaining to non-religious folks spirituality in consumer-oriented terms. “I go to church because it lifts my spirits,” or strengthens my resolve, or makes me a better person. I go to church because I “get something out of it.” I trade in a few hours and put my money in the plate so that, in return, I will receive something to improve my life. We look for the payoff in our faith because that’s the way we measure every other aspect of our lives.

It’s also why I sometimes stay up way past my bedtime on Saturday nights working on a sermon that I should have finished during daylight hours. It’s why my stomach is always upset on Sunday mornings. I want to deliver a sermon that delivers on the people’s expectations which usually means exceeding my own.

Not surprisingly, Paul didn’t deliver on those spiritual expectations. He didn’t deliver dramatic spirituality. He didn’t deliver intense feelings unless you count frustration and anger. There were no miracles at least not in Corinth, not according to these letters. And rather than work harder to make these kinds of experiences happen, Paul just leveled with the Corinthians. He shared with them the truth about us.

We are unadorned clay pots – cheap jars – fragile lives that we can’t finally protect. Yes, life is tragic by itself. No, I’m not a super-apostle – I’m not capable of overcoming your depression, or healing your disease, or saving you from suffering. Attempts to the contrary are futile and misleading because they set us up to conceal the truth of that fact. We cannot overcome our own fragility. This is not the good news.

Kate Bowler, a church historian in the Duke Divinity School came face to face with this reality when she was diagnosed in her 30s with stage 4 colon cancer. Bowler soon realized that even though she had studied and critiqued the prosperity gospel phenomenon in our country, she had been living her own kind of prosperity gospel. “I would love to report,” she wrote, “that what I found in the prosperity gospel was something so foreign and terrible to me that I was warned away, but what I discovered was both familiar and painfully sweet: the promise that I could curate my life, minimize my losses, and stand on my successes. And no matter how many times I rolled my eyes at the creeds’ outrageous certainties, I craved them just the same. I had my own Prosperity Gospel, a flowering weed grown in with all the rest.”¹

Instead, Bowler’s successful life came to a screeching halt and she walked right into the void. But Bowler has found a kind of good news, one that doesn’t pretend that part of life isn’t tragedy and loss. One that doesn’t pretend that we are something other than vulnerable earthenware, cheap pots that decay. One that’s not built on a lie. It’s similar to the gospel that Paul argues for. It’s not good news rooted in our capacity to get better or stronger or wiser or purer. It’s not achieved by looking past our infirmities or ignoring them. It’s not pretending that tragedy is not at the center of our lives that we aren’t all dying even if we don’t yet know our death dates. It’s treasure rooted in something larger than ourselves. A power that is mightier than any prosperity gospel that we try to concoct.

I saw a glimpse of that power last month at church. Like many communities around the country, Baltimore is under siege by the drug epidemic. We’ve been that way for decades, of course, but the current epidemic is of another scale altogether. From 2014 to 2016, drug and alcohol related deaths in the state of Maryland doubled from about 1000 to about 2000. A third of those deaths happened in Baltimore City.²

We invited the City’s Health Commissioner, Dr. Leana Wen, to come and address our congregation and surrounding community. She gave us a riveting presentation, taught us how to administer the overdose drug naloxone, and then moved to take questions. It was informative and it was also safe for people who like to address problems as if they are not our own. Dr. Wen gave an impassioned plea for reducing stigma, but we were all like scientists studying a subject that was

¹ Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason: and Other Lies I’ve Loved*, (New York: Random House), 2018, xiii-xiv.

² “Drug and Alcohol-Related Intoxication Deaths in Maryland, 2016,” MD Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, June, 2017, https://bha.health.maryland.gov/OVERDOSE_PREVENTION/Documents/Maryland%202016%20Overdose%20Annual%20report.pdf

something other than we. I knew I was only going to perpetuate the dynamic as I asked the first question in the Q&A. I was about to read Anne's story on her behalf. I felt terribly uncomfortable reading someone else's story, yet Anne did not want to step into the light on this one. "I want you to read it," she insisted, "because I can't." I thank Anne today for granting me permission to share what happened.

"As a recovering heroin addict and alcoholic," her story read, "I am no stranger to the judgment of others. In my active addiction, I was gawked at, yelled at, and, eventually, just ignored. In Union Station in Washington, DC, a mother stood next to me and explained to her daughter that people who look like me are called junkies because 'they're trash.' At home, I used separate silverware for fear that I could spread disease to my family. Even now, some years later, a doctor made sure to tell me that I should think long and hard before starting a family, because I wouldn't want to pass 'THOSE genes' on to a baby."

"From start to finish, my experience has taught me that addiction is a disease of isolation perpetuated by shame. The behaviors are antisocial, the symptoms are secret, and even the most accessible forms of treatment are anonymous. In your opinion, Dr. Wen, what can we do as a City and as a faith community to demystify and de-stigmatize addiction? What are the roadblocks that stand in our way?"

The crowd turned silent and Dr. Wen's eyes looked misty. "First of all," she said with compassion, "I want to say to the person who wrote this, how much I admire and applaud your courage. . ."

"—It was me," Anne said quietly, at first. The whole church turned to look at her, but she was undeterred. "It *is* me," she said. "This is *my* story." Though I could be wrong I had a sense that many people looking at Anne were thinking that the person they were looking at didn't look like their stereotype of a someone with a heroin addiction.

What followed is hard to describe. Complete strangers standing up and sharing with each other their own stories of addiction or the loss of loved ones to addiction. Examples shared of what led to healing or what didn't. Testimony from other church members standing up, to claim their addiction status so that others might find healing without the added isolation and exclusion that Christian church bears some responsibility for creating in the first place. It was as if the gathering had turned from a class lecture to an AA meeting because one person had the courage to own her own brokenness – her own humanity - instead of running from it.

After the event I asked Anne why she changed her mind. "It was a flesh and blood, real life opportunity to reclaim the power my illness has always had over me, the same power that keeps me silent and embarrassed and ashamed. I've come to see that, in silence, I tacitly and tactfully perpetuate the same stigma I rail against so passionately in private. It was a great, cathartic moment - not of my own making, to be sure, but I am so glad I was there for it."

"But we have this treasure in clay jars, Paul says, "so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." A flesh and blood, real life opportunity to reclaim the power of God at work in the very places we once counted at weakness.

Kate Bowler asks in her book, “What would it mean for Christians to give up that little piece of the American Dream that says, ‘You are limitless’? Everything is not possible. The mighty kingdom of God is not yet here. What if ‘rich’ did not have to mean ‘wealthy’, and ‘whole’ did not have to mean ‘healed’? What if being the people of ‘the gospel’ meant that we are simply people with good news? God is here. We are loved. It is enough.”³ Clay pots entrusted with a treasure that shines through all of our cracks.

What would it mean for the high school student fretting over what is next, trained for the past decade to achieve, achieve, achieve to take a breath and ask a deeper question, why am I here – what is God’s purpose for me? What would it mean for the parent working day after day to set their child up for success to ask the question, “is the kind of success that I supporting, success that is actually good for my child and for the world?” What would it mean for the manager to recognize that there is a world in which lives are cherished *more* than bottom lines? What would it mean for a church to recognize that clinging to our life more tightly cannot make it less temporary or fragile, it only prevents us from experiencing the freedom Christ has already given?

And what would it mean for a pastor like me, seduced by the prospect of becoming a super-apostle when what the church might really need from its clergy is a gospel that can best be seen and known not in our omniscience, but in our brokenness?

I don’t know the answer to those questions. But one thing I’ve learned in the past couple of years is that it’s never too late to try. And what relief can come when you know in your heart and not just in your head that there are bigger things at work in the world! A power that is mightier than any prosperity gospel that we try to concoct! The power of Jesus Christ - the object of our proclamation, our alpha and omega - the gospel that can save us.

³ Bowler, *Everything Happens*, 21.