



All Are Ministers

TEXT
2 Corinthians 4:7–18

February 14, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

“**W**e hold this treasure in clay jars,” Paul says. “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are persecuted, but not forsaken.”

Sometimes the strength of God is revealed in our weakness. We will reflect on this wisdom during this season of Lent.

Lent is a season of forty days (not counting Sundays) that carries us from Ash Wednesday, when — as Hallie reminded us Wednesday — we are dust, and to dust we shall return. Lent carries us from Ash Wednesday to Easter, when we are reminded that death simply lacks the power to pull us from God.

In between these contrasting truths, we hold the gospel treasure in clay jars.

Paul says when we are weak, the grace of God shows up in our lives, in our bodies.

Sometimes the Apostle Paul sounded so confident about this. In the Philippian letter, he writes: *I am confident that the one who began a good work among us will bring it to completion.*¹

And in the letter to the Romans, he writes: *I am convinced*

*that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*²

I am encouraged by his strength.

But then in Paul’s letter to Timothy, he sounds fragile: *Come to me soon. I won’t make it through the winter, and I need to see you one more time, Timothy. Come to me soon.*³

Here Paul is honest about how fragile we are in ministry.

So this Lenten season, we want to reflect on what it means to hold the treasure of God’s grace in clay jars — to know what it is to be both bold and weak; both confident and confused; both trusting and struggling.

Today we start with this truth: Paul says God has gifted every Christian with a gift, and that gift is ministry. It’s spread across the back of our bulletin, where we list the members of our ministry team. Just above that it reads: “The ministers of this church are all the members of this church family.” You are all engaged in ministry. I don’t know if you think of yourselves

that way, but you should. Our baptism calls us into ministry.

You don’t have to think of this in a formal fashion. Ministry just means that our faith is never for our benefit alone. The love of God we know in Jesus Christ is to influence our encounters with those whom we meet; it is to shape our presence in the world. That is a hopeful recognition, but also challenging.

It’s challenging because the needs of life are huge, and we feel unprepared to be the body of Christ in this world.

If you feel fragile in the work of ministry, you are not alone. Moses worried that he could not be a vessel of God’s work because he didn’t speak well.

Jeremiah felt that he was too young.

And Paul says he was the worst of sinners — because Paul persecuted the church. He was there when Stephen was stoned to death.

All of these giants in the faith were made of clay. Being weak is not rare; it is the normal, natural consequence of being a creature rather than the creator.

It was about eight years ago now that my son Nathan and I were out taking a jog together.

He was interested in running cross-country at Shawnee Mission East, and we went running together. We were only together for a little while, you understand. I left him in the dust. You see, I had been jogging most of the summer and he had not. That lasted about three days, and then the tables turned.

The problem? *I am dust, and to dust I am returning.* I realized the days of outrunning my son are over now. They will never come again. That capacity was not something I controlled. That's the way it is with the body. Good eyesight and clear hearing; the ability to remember what I have read or to remember the names of the people who moved in down the street; even the ability to get out of bed without groaning because something is sore — those capacities are not things that I own. They are just on loan.

I am a clay jar. That is without a doubt.

We sometimes tell ourselves that the norm is to be strong and in control. The norm is to be free from weakness and for life to be rich and blessed and easy. But that's not the case.

The norm is for life to be a mixed bag — to have wonderful blessed days, but also to have troubled days. And that trouble is not an aberration; it's to be expected. That's what is "normal" in this world.

Paul understood this. He lived it. But he also knew that in the midst of our weakness, the power of the gospel shines through.

Each Monday morning, our staff gathers in the Chapel, and we begin our week with a devotion time. Several weeks ago, Kathy Lueckert was leading us. She shared with us a blog post on prayer that I thought was insightful. She read this portion to us: *I have often prayed for God to make my life better. But now I pray to make it count.*

God, my friend is dying. Don't just make it better, make it COUNT. If she can be better, let it be so, but don't let this suffering to have been wasted. Work it for good. *Please show up and show your grace. Make it count.*

God, I'm so busy and so tired. I so badly want to pray "make it better! Make it stop!" but I'm going to pray "make it count, please," instead. Let me learn grace under fire. *Show your strength in my weakness. Make it count.*

God, I'm at my wits end with my kids. They won't eat, sleep or obey as I'd hoped they would. I want it to be better, please Lord ... but instead I will pray "make it count." Help me to be patient with my slow to learn kids, as you are patient with slow to learn me. ... Lord, make these trials in parenting count.

God, thanks for a lovely, sweet season in my marriage. ... Please, God, make it count. Help us to be thankful and still work hard at our marriage, not leaving prayer for the tough times alone. *Let this good season count.*⁴

I think that's what Paul would pray. In this season of

weakness, make it count. We have been given the gift of ministry; make it count.

The fingerprints of God are not witnessed in the circumstances of our lives always being positive.

Remember, we receive this teaching from an apostle who writes about a crucified Lord and who himself had been beaten, imprisoned, gone hungry, ostracized and struggled with what he called a "thorn in the flesh" from which he found no relief.

In his own life, in his own body, he knew how God's power is revealed in our weakness.

We all are in ministry. We are called to let the grace of Jesus Christ show through our lives by how we live life — no matter the circumstances.

Sandy was married to Luke for 100 years, I suppose. They were high school sweethearts, and they walked through life with one another. Both of them were pillars of the church I served in South Carolina.

They had both sung in the choir since shortly after the invention of music. Neither one of them had much voice anymore, but they had a confidence in the truth of what they sang.

But on a particular Saturday, we gathered in the sanctuary. Sandy sat not with the altos, but in the front pew. Luke was not there at all. We read "The Lord is my shepherd," and we sang *Abide with Me*. And then we met in the fellowship hall for hugs and lemonade.

The next morning, Sandy was at the 8:30 service in her choir robe and holding a box of Kleenex. After worship, I spoke with her. “I didn’t think you would be here today.”

She said, “Where else could I be? I am completely lost. I don’t know how to get through a single day without having to take care of that man. I am lost.

“But I know that God will take care of him. And I need God to take care of me, so I have come today where I always come to be with God. Where else could I be?”

She felt like a clay jar, but I saw treasure. Do you know what I’m talking about?

Sara was a Presbyterian Elder in South Carolina. Sara had a rather routine medical procedure and received some blood in the hospital. It was the mid-1980s, and the protocol to protect the nation’s blood supply from HIV was lacking. Sara contracted HIV. It quickly became AIDS. In those days, the only thing worse than the disease was the stigma and fear that surrounded AIDS.

One Sunday Sara walked to the front of the sanctuary to stand before her church family. She said, “I want to tell you something: I have AIDS, and it will kill me. I do not have long now. I thank those of you who are praying for me.

“I hate what has happened to me; but I want you to know that I trust in Jesus Christ, and I am at peace. Jesus also suffered greatly and has shown us that suffering will not have the last word. My faith is not shaken,

and I am not afraid. When it comes to you, and suffering will come to you,” she said, “remember that I was here, and do not be afraid.”⁵

She knew she was clay ... dust to dust ... but there was treasure in her heart, a light shining through.

What I am trying to say today is that I hope your life is going well. I really do. I hope you are at the top of your game and that everything is going wonderfully. But if it is not, if you are in the storm, don’t think the blessing of God has turned from you. The blessing of God is not limited to positive circumstances. The blessing of God shows up in our weakness too.

Paul says we are all given the gift of ministry, of sharing the love of Christ in this world. It’s a gift.

No matter the circumstances, make it count.

¹Philippians 1:6

²Romans 8:38–39

³2 Timothy 4:9–15

⁴Bronlea.com “make it count”

⁵Sara Touchton was an Elder and educator in the Shandon Presbyterian Church in Columbia, SC. Her husband, Bruce, was my financial secretary in the Seven Oaks Presbyterian Church, Columbia.

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.