



## Being the Church: Treasure in Clay Jars

*TEXT*  
*2 Corinthians 4:7–12*

August 16, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

**B**ut 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. 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 bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So, death is at work in us, but life in you.

Friends, we are continuing our series about being the church. We are reading through the Apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church. Last week we talked about being letters of Christ; that the gospel is written on our hearts, our living, beating, struggling, human hearts. Today we have this marvelous image of having this treasure in ordinary, plain, clay jars. Corinth is still a city today of about 30,000 or so residents. The remains of the ancient city are a few kilometers away. Re-

member that Corinth sits on an isthmus between the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean Sea.

In the ancient world it sat on a major trade route between Asia and southern Europe. Archaeologists, through their excavations, have found thousands of pieces of pottery. That is not unusual. But what struck the archaeologists is that much of the pottery is very plain. It seems that while other parts of the Mediterranean created decorative, artistic works, Corinthians produced very functional and plain pottery. It did not have to look beautiful. It just needed to serve its purpose. It just needed to work. So, it makes sense that Paul would use this as an image for these new followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

You are like a treasure in clay jars. Plain, simple jars. I know, Paul says, we may look very ordinary just like the pots and jars you produce. But we look that way so that people will know the treasure is not us. The treasure in us comes from God, not from us. People will look at us and expect very little; then when we show them the treasure that is the love of Jesus, they will be astounded.

I have noticed that to be true today. When the ordinary

reveals a treasure, people take notice.

Several years ago, I was honored to preach at the ordination service for one of my former students. Kristin was ordained as the pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Poland, Ohio, a small town in a rural community about an hour northwest of Pittsburgh in northcentral Ohio. We had a wonderful celebration and then an incredible covered dish supper with fresh corn and casseroles — oh, and pierogies, several different kinds of pierogies, which I had never had. The food was all homemade and delicious.

As I was leaving to go back to the Pittsburgh airport, some of the women gave me a huge plate of leftovers to take with me. I remember that Kristin, thinking it might be a bother, said I did not have to take the food with me. But I smiled and told her it was such wonderful food, I was looking forward to eating it on the plane for dinner.

When I got to the airport, it was late, and I was eager to catch the last flight back to Atlanta. I remember the TSA security line was practically empty. I put my rollerboard and robe and backpack on the belt, and then took a gray bin and put

the plastic bag with the food in it and pushed them all through. I walked through and collected my rollerboard and robe and backpack and then waited ... and waited. I was watching my time because I needed to get back to Atlanta to teach first thing in the morning.

No gray bin. No plate of church food. Then I looked around the machine and watched the woman who was running the machine. She was a lovely African American woman with the bright blue TSA uniform. She kept looking at the screen, then sent the bin through and came to me and said, "Sir, is this yours?"

And I said, "Yes, ma'am."

Then she asked, "What is it, because I can't see it?"

I explained that I had just come from a church supper and was trying to catch this last flight to Atlanta. She looked at me and said, "This is a plate of church food?"

I said, "Yes, ma'am. I just came from a worship service and church supper, and I'm trying to get this last flight to Atlanta."

She interrupted me: "Church food?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Made by a whole bunch of church ladies, I bet?"

"Yes, ma'am, and probably some men, too."

"Homemade?"

"Yes, ma'am, all of it, and I am trying to get this last flight to Atlanta."

Then she looked around and leaned toward me and said, "I'll buy it off you."

And I said, "Well, actually, I was going to eat it for dinner on the flight."

And she looked at me and said, "Well didn't Jesus talk about sharing?"

And I said, "Ma'am, the Lord Jesus Christ, Lamb of God, never talked about sharing food in the Pittsburgh airport."

She shook her head and smiled and said, "Well, just take it then." OK, I know. It did occur to me while I was on the plane eating the food that I should have just given it to her. A little less judgment please ... I know ... sinner ... selfish.

I understand. It was just some homemade food: casseroles, pierogies, breads, rolls, pies, cakes. It may seem ordinary to you, but it's really treasure.

Almost 40 years ago, John Naisbitt wrote a book titled *Megatrends*. He described the most significant American trends he saw coming in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One of them he named was that with the rise of high tech would come the rise of high touch. The more technology we have, the more people will value high touch — like homemade casseroles and pies and cakes and vegetables from the garden and home-canned pickles and jars of kimchee and quilts you make and scarves and hats you knit and sew and pictures you drew and hand-written notes.

One of my former students at Columbia Seminary, Kyle, left an up-and-coming fast track young executive job at Coca Cola's international headquarters in Atlanta. He worked in

marketing and was the team leader for a new marketing strategy. He had made a presentation in an auditorium at the world headquarters to a group of colleagues.

A couple days later, he received an embossed envelope through interoffice mail. The envelope read, "M. Kent." He opened the hand-written note and read: "Caught your presentation this morning. Very impressed with your ideas. Liked your spirit even more. Glad you're part of our team. Thank you. M. Kent." It was written on the corporate stationery of Mr. Muhtar Kent, the CEO of Coca Cola Enterprises International.

Kyle was looking at the note, reading it again, when his cubicle mate looked over and asked, "Hey, what is that?"

Kyle said, "It's a note from Mr. Kent."

His coworker said, "You received a handwritten note from Muhtar Kent? Can I see it?"

Kyle handed it over to him, and he stood up and said, "Hey, everyone, Michael got a handwritten thank you note from Mr. Kent!" People came from all over the floor to look at it. "Oooh. Can I hold it? Can I touch it?" His boss said to Kyle, "Kyle, this is a big deal. You need to get that framed."

Then his boss offered to do it for him. He sent the note and envelope downstairs, and it came back framed. I said to Kyle, "Do not forget the power of a handwritten note." Kyle is serving a church in Louisiana, and I know for a fact he sends lots of handwritten notes.

You may think to yourself, “It was just a hand-scribbled thank you note. It was just a plate of ordinary church food.” If you think that, then you are not paying attention. It may look ordinary to you, but it is treasure.

Come on, church. We were built for this. We were created for this. So many are feeling more isolated than ever, and now, we can reach out and say to them: “You are not alone in this, because we are with you.” And you may be afflicted in every way, but you are not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken. You may be struck down, but you are not destroyed — because we have this treasure in ordinary clay jars, and we are the church of Jesus Christ. And we have been at this for nearly 2,000 years, and we are still here — because we carry in us the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, in our bodies, so that you may see his life in us.

Being the church ... letters of Christ ... treasure in ordinary clay jars ... all for the glory of God. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.**

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.