

### Clay Jars and Teapots

For the next few weeks, we will spend time with Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth, the same community we visited a few weeks ago. What was a fragile relationship has now all but disintegrated. At the end of his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul mentions planning to visit them. In the early verses of this letter, he speaks of a "letter written in tears and anguish (2 Corinthians 2:4). This 'letter of tears' is lost," suggesting that this second letter is part of a more robust correspondence than we are privy to.<sup>1</sup> In other words, Paul has poured out his heart to his beloved Corinthian friends multiple times out of love for them and for the gospel they share. In chapter 2, he mentions not wanting to make another painful visit and not wanting to cause them grief. He goes on to recount the struggles and the breakthroughs he has experienced in his travels planting and nurturing churches like theirs. Dr. Mary Hinkle Shore advises that we should:

Read 2 Corinthians the way you would read a letter from someone who was choosing words very carefully so as not to do further damage to a strained relationship, and who at the same time was having difficulty keeping emotions in check. Paul's estrangement from the Corinthians, along with the arrival of teachers in Corinth who threaten his place of leadership in that church, are key to understanding this letter.<sup>2</sup>

Paul is vulnerable, as is his relationship with his beloved Corinthian siblings in Christ. This vulnerability and this desire to hold a fragile relationship together is likely familiar to every

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper4b/#2Cor=>

<sup>2</sup> <https://enterthebible.org/courses/2-corinthians/lessons/summary-of-2-corinthians>

single one of us. I imagine most if not all of us can picture the face of a beloved friend or family member with whom we have been at odds. On a larger scale, words and accusations saturate the very air we breathe. Our corporate communal fabric is tattered, too. For Paul the fraying edges of this relationship threaten to undermine the Corinthians' hearing the true gospel in the midst of competing voices. One might argue that it is increasingly difficult to hear and to share the gospel message in our own fractious context, too. A lot is at stake, for Paul, for the Corinthians, and for us. [Read 2 Corinthians 4:1-12]

When I was ordained in August of 1996, my friend and colleague, Gordon Turnbull read this text when he offered the charge to me. This bespectacled 6-foot-tall former English teacher from Alabama, proceeded to put one hand on his hip while crooking the other, and then recalled a familiar nursery rhyme:

I'm a little teapot, short and stout.

Here is my handle, here is my spout.

When I get all steamed up, hear me shout.

Tip me over and pour me out.

Gordon wanted me to remember that ministry is largely about sharing the light, the gospel that has been poured into me, into us. He's right of course—even if I wasn't particularly thrilled with the short and stout bit.<sup>3</sup>

Paul is concerned that the Corinthians are losing sight of the gospel. There are competing voices in Corinth, competing preachers in fact. We don't hear their side of things. We

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. Gordon Turnbull now serves as Senior Pastor in Greenville, SC. I am forever grateful for his and his wife Betsy's friendship and encouragement.

only hear Paul's take on their ministries, and Paul seems to indicate that they are suggesting that the gospel Paul carries is somehow lost or hidden or not real or true because of Paul's own fragility and limitations. Paul argues that his fragility is actually in service to the gospel, however, that his being a clay pot with dings and scratches and cracks makes it crystal clear that the good news of God's saving work in Jesus is God's work, not Paul's, not ours. As some would say, our being clay jars is not a bug of our ministry but a feature. As astonishing as it may be, God chooses to be born as a fragile human and continues to choose faulty and fractious humans to share the gospel. It is not about winners or losers, sinners or saints. Paul refuses to divide the world up into us against them—whatever *they* may be. We—meaning all of us—carry the death and life of Christ within us. We are not superheroes, nor will we ever be, no matter how fit or wealthy or brilliant or successful we become. We are finite and fragile. The gospel, God's saving grace in Jesus Christ is not. And yet, our very human tendency is to believe that we have to be a perfect, pristine teapot poured out with pinkies raised in order to share the gospel or to make a difference in the lives of others. Sharing the gospel does not mean that we are called to wait until we have all the answers or until we live lives free of doubts or setbacks. Being faithful does not equal perfect health or the picture-perfect home or a family that matches a Norman Rockwell painting, no matter what some claim. Being faithful means recognizing that we and our lives are clay jars—teapots even—meant to pour out the good news we have received, the good news of love, hope, justice, and grace for us and for others in Jesus' name.

In his song entitled "Anthem," Leonard Cohen sang: "There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."<sup>4</sup> Yes, cracks allow the light to get in. Cracks also enable

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<sup>4</sup> <https://genius.com/Leonard-cohen-anthem-lyrics>

the light to get out. A watertight, blemish-free, vacuum sealed jar is not a holy vessel. The clay jars or pots that Paul speaks of were everyday kitchen utensils, meant to carry food and water to feed and sustain ordinary humans. Those pots were never intended to hold on to what they carried. Nor are we. We are built and shaped to share what we have received; we are formed to pour out what has been poured into us through the life, death, and resurrection Jesus Christ. We are all clay jars; we are all cracked pots; we are all little teapots, short and stout, long and lean, weak and strong, young and old, regardless of ability, nation, or gender. We are all fragile and fickle, **and** we are all fearfully and wonderfully made.

So, the question comes: what then are we full of? What are we pouring out? How do our lives reflect the light and love poured into us? If we are in fact clay jars, cracked pots, are we pouring out light and joy and hope and love OR are we spilling out something else? Hatred, disdain, cynicism, and ugliness are gushing at us like firehoses at every turn. We are clay jars with chips and cracks and dings and scratches, so it is understandable that at least a bit of all that is flooding toward us would seep in. Life is not a tea party with scones and finger sandwiches. The rhetoric from all directions is harsh and constant. The sludge seeps into me, too. I have been known to get all steamed up and shout about the injustice and harm being done to God's dear ones by bullies around the world, AND I have been known to get all steamed up and shout when my outrage gets the best of me, when I get swept up in the snark about those with whom I disagree.

Dear ones, we cannot control the grace that God pours out for us and for all; nor can we control the tide of all that comes spewing our way. We can however confess when we drink our fill from polluted streams, when we allow other voices, other things, other words to dilute or

contaminate what we pour out in return. We can confess when the persistent shadows of fear, suspicion, and meanness get in the way of Christ's light shining out from us. And we can answer the gracious call to turn back to the One who promises to fill us with all good things again and again.

The baptismal font and the chalice are intentionally front and center each time we gather for worship. Along with the plate—or paten—that holds the bread, these objects give us visual reminders of the ways Christ gave himself for us, poured out himself for us. In confession we often pour water into the font reminding us of the ways we are made new in the waters of baptism, the ways we are redeemed and made whole not by scrubbing and polishing ourselves, but by being washed clean and made new by the grace of God poured out on us and for us in Jesus Christ. When we gather at this table, we are reminded that the bread is broken and *given* to us and that the cup is poured out for us and *given* to us as well. We cannot go out and grab the promise for ourselves. We cannot buy or barter for God's sustaining grace and abundant mercy. Nope. Not at all. The light of the world, Jesus Christ himself is poured out for us and for all, given to humanity—fickle, brittle, and fragile as we are, poured into us for our sake **and** for the sake of God's entire embattled and beloved world.

This is not a tea party. This is a feast, the joyful feast of the people of God. The table is set. The bread is ready. The pitcher is full. Come and be filled, my dear clay jar, cracked pot, little teapot friends. Come and be filled so that the love, grace, light, and hope of Jesus Christ that is poured out for us and in us may also flow out **from** us for the blessing of the world and to the glory of God in Christ's name.

Amen.