

Homily Notes for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
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“We hold this treasure—this gift—in earthen vessels...therefore we do not lose heart...”
2 Corinthians 4:7

In this second letter to the church at Corinth, Paul seeks to answer his distractors and critics who challenge the legitimacy and authenticity of his ministry. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul sought to deal with the divisions in the Corinthian church and to offer practical advice on how to develop a credible Christian witness in a society filled with contradictions to the faith. Yet, opponents arose whom Paul identified as false teachers. They challenged the authority of his ministry and sought to use the afflictions of his personal life as a distraction from the gospel and doctrine he preached.

Paul offers himself in a very personal way as he writes this second letter to the Corinthians. He is viewed by many as contemptible and abject in the eyes of the world. Yet, he presents the afflictions and trials of his life as a living testimony to the hope we have in God’s ultimate power and glory. Paul’s defense of his ministry is not a justification of himself. It is a justification of the gospel of Jesus Christ which he proclaims. Paul is clear that the afflictions of life cannot overshadow the glory of God’s power at work in us through Jesus Christ.

It is often tempting to believe that the validity of our ministry and our testimony is determined by the outward appearance of success. While many of us Christians would not define success simply by material acquisition, we are tempted to highly value the acquisition of power, influence and general overall stability. It is easy to give testimony to the faithfulness of God when our lives bear the apparent fruit of God’s favor.

However, what happens when the gospel of Jesus Christ brings not the popularity of the masses but brings the often lonesome journey of faithfulness? When our congregation makes a commitment to stand with the most marginalized people in our community, regular worship attendance drops off drastically. When our denomination takes an action that is controversial, yet faithful to its understanding of the gospel, members begin to withhold their giving and threaten to withdraw their membership. When our ecumenical agencies seek to give a visible witness to the unity of Christians, institutional power struggles begin to unravel the ecumenical tapestry of witness that previous generations have left us.

The words of Paul to the Corinthians speak to us. “We hold this treasure in earthen vessels.” The grace we have been given, the gospel which we proclaim, is not of our own creation or merit. It is an invaluable gift that God has entrusted to us with all of our human frailties and limitations. God’s greatest gifts to us are found in the things and places that others would determine as not worthy to hold the gift of the Divine—a baby born in a stable to a family that would soon become refugees, a righteous man hanging on

a shameful cross. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians he reminded them of their own call to follow Christ. They were not called because of their wisdom by human standards or their power or nobility of birth. But God chose them in the absence of these things to show forth the power and glory of God. We are all earthen vessels—clay jars whose value is determined not by the external circumstances of our lives but by the treasure—the presence of the Divine that abides in us.

Our faith and our ministry are rooted in the reality of the incarnation. The presence of the Divine in the human contradictions of life reveals the extraordinary excellence of God's power at work in us and through us. It is often during the seasons of affliction and trial that we come to realize the strength and endurance of God's presence and power in our midst. We cannot have a Christian faith and witness without a cross, yet the very essence of our faith is in a God who brings back to life that which evil would oppress and destroy.

Paul reminds the Corinthians who would separate themselves from him because of his afflictions that they share the same faith. There is an awesome gift which God gives to us in Jesus the Christ. This gift is seen in the unity God has given us in faith. We stand with Christ and one another in suffering that we might also share the victory which comes through struggles. Grace is not limited to individual or personal benefit but for the collective good. It is through grace born of struggles that we are able to offer our highest praise and deepest thanksgiving unto God.

We speak and act based upon what we believe, and we believe that which is not visible. We look beyond the trials and afflictions. We look beyond seasons of apparent defeat and failure. We look beyond the brokenness of humanity. We look beyond the limitations and divisions of the Christian community called church. We discover this treasure—this precious gift of God's power and victory.

Like Paul's, our ministry is not of our own making. Our search for the unity God has given to us in Jesus the Christ is not of our own choosing. We are vessels not of silver and gold, but fragile vessels of clay crafted in the hands of the Holy One and used for the purposes of the Divine.

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