

“MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE”
2 Corinthians 4:6-10, 16-18
NYC PRAYER DAY June 20, 2010
York Center Church of the Brethren
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One of the joys of being your pastor for fourteen years has been watching our children grow up.

My earliest memory of Arbie is from her first birthday party. There she sat, a sweet little blonde-haired girl with a huge smile on her face anxious to dig into her birthday cake.

One of my favorite memories of Renee is when she was about three or four and came into my office with her Mom. I was leaning back in my chair with my feet propped on the credenza, reading, as I often do. Renee walked in, looked at me, and said, “We don’t put our feet on the furniture!” I promptly put my feet on the floor.

I knew these two little girls would grow up to be amazing young women- after all, look at their parents and their faith community. This congregation raises amazing young adults. But even today there is more to them than meets the eye. Yes, on the outside we see talented musicians, athletes, and students. But what really matters is on the inside; what really matters is their faith and their commitment to Christ. And that influences everything else about them. I hope we can all say the same about ourselves and each other: What really matters is our commitment to our faith and to Christ.

“More than meets the eye” is the theme for the upcoming National Youth Conference. It is a theme that resonates not only with teenagers but with all of us who call the church home. I remember quite well the pain of adolescence when I thought I wasn’t good enough, pretty enough, thin enough, smart enough. I felt insecure at school and never thought I measured up. But the church youth group was a different matter. There I felt accepted and welcomed for who I was and encouraged to be who God created me to be. The treasure of God’s light within me and shining through me was nurtured and celebrated by my family, my pastor and my church family.

I attended National Youth Conference as a participant, one year out of high school in 1978, and it changed my life. What I found in the Rocky Mountains was a community of people, youth and adults, who were trying very hard to take Jesus seriously. What I found were worship services that opened my heart, speakers that challenged me, and workshops that opened my mind. I came home with a new sense of identity, and although I couldn’t have expressed it in words then, I can tell you now that I heard the call of God and that experience in the mountains is what eventually led me into ministry.

Not everyone will have a life changing experience at NYC- but we do all we can to make it possible. The church family is a key player in how our kids will benefit from such an amazing experience. You have nurtured these two young women through their entire lives. You have encouraged them, challenged them, welcomed them, accepted them. Your example as people of faith has influenced who they are. Their speech isn’t just a creation of their own imaginations, it is the fruit of what you have planted in them since they were toddlers.

The best thing we can do as a congregation is to help each and every member of our faith family recognize the treasure of God that lives within. The clay jars that are our human bodies are unique, special, and fragile. They are a gift from God, created in the image of God. The light of Christ that fills those clay jars completes the creation and makes us each a work of art.

It is interesting that the Apostle Paul would compare human beings to clay jars. Pottery was ubiquitous in his world. Everyone but the very rich used common clay vessels for everyday use and storage. Those who read or heard Paul’s letter would have had many jars and pots sitting in their homes.

Although fired clay can be very fragile, it is extremely durable. In those days a well-made

pot could keep things safe because they were nearly watertight and resisted decay and corrosion. Many clay vessels, more than 5,000 years old, have been discovered nearly intact. The only reason the fragile parchments of the Dead Sea scrolls survived for 2,000 years is because they were stored in huge clay jars.

Some jars may not be much to look at- but that is part of their allure. Maybe that is why I am drawn to pottery- you start with moist dirt- clay- and by the molding of your hands, a pottery wheel, a kiln, and some glaze you can create a thing of beauty that is quite useful.

There were times when my pottery classes were extremely frustrating. The clay would not cooperate, my hands had no idea what they doing, and once, what I thought would be a big, beautiful vase turned out to be a big blob of clay.

We had a few sayings in that class, "The clay will be what it wants to be;" and "Glaze hides a multitude of sins." Some of the ugliest pots I made surprised me with their beauty after they were glazed and fired. When you are an amateur like I am you never know how something will turn out.

Paul says that God put this amazing grace in the clay jars of our humanity so we would remember how fragile we are and how strong God is. He doesn't say this to denigrate the human body- after all, it was good enough for Jesus. Paul wants the Corinthians to remember that their faith is not generated by their own power but by the power of God. Being Christians doesn't make us super-human or better than anyone else and the clay jars of our ordinary lives are supposed to remind us of that.

Paul gives the credit for his ministry to God. He was, after all, one of the church's most vicious persecutors until the light of Christ literally knocked him to the ground. If anyone knows how fallible a human being is, it's Paul. And yet, he writes, God can use even someone like him to do great things.

Some of my favorite pots have chips in them or the glaze is uneven on one side or the bottoms are too heavy but that doesn't make them any less useful or attractive. And the same can be said for each of us. We probably know more than anyone else what imperfections chip our lives. We know how far we are from who God has created us to be. And Paul is saying, "Welcome to the club! If you were perfect you wouldn't need God."

Paul reminds us that life can be rough sometimes. "We are afflicted in every way," he writes, "but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed." These are some of the most hopeful and encouraging words in scripture.

Human weakness and imperfection do not hinder God. Some of the most questionable people in scripture have been God's strongest partners: Moses, David, Rahab, Ruth, Esther, Jacob, Mary, Peter, and of course, Paul.

Doesn't a clay jar seem like an odd place to store your treasure? Nowadays we put our treasures in locked, metal safe deposit boxes and steel bank vaults. Paul's point is that through God all things are possible- including frail, unreliable people carrying around the glory of Jesus Christ inside our fragile human bodies. This is some of the best news we can hear. We are good enough to carry the divine spark inside of us. We are good enough to be the bearers of God's most precious treasure.

Sometimes we are so focused on the chips and cracks in our clay jars, and those of others, that we totally overlook the divine spark within. And we have to be careful that we don't get so hung up on our simple clay jars that we become arrogant about our ordinariness.

Mahatma Gandhi said, "My imperfections and failures are as much a blessing from God as my successes and my talents, and I lay them both at God's feet. Why should God have chosen me, an imperfect instrument, for such a mighty experiment? I think God deliberately did

so.”

One of the great blessings of National Youth Conference is that we don't care if you are a computer geek or a cheerleader, a football star or a benchwarmer. We strip away all the pretense and status markers of the adolescent culture and we welcome everyone as a child of God. We see each participant as an ordinary clay jar with an exquisite treasure inside. We attempt, through worship, workshops, service projects and small groups, to help teenagers recognize that divine spark within and nurture it until it becomes a holy flame.

And my hope is that the church does the same thing- opens its doors to each and every one of us regardless of what our clay jars look like and welcomes us, nurtures us, and celebrates the exquisite treasure within.

Do we always do this as a church family? No.

Are we sometimes cracked pots? Yes.

Does God still love us, call us and welcome us? Yes.

We can be clay jars that pour out grace or jars that pour out bitterness. If the light of Christ truly lives within us we will be bearers of grace and we will recognize once and for all that we are God's holy creation, God's precious children, sisters and brothers of Jesus Christ. We will recognize once and for all that we are indeed more than meets the eye.

Amen.