Yr. B, Proper 4
June 2, 2024
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
Christ Episcopal Church
1523 Words

Lessons: **Deuteronomy 5:12-15**
Psalm 81
2nd Corinthians 4:5-12
Mark 2:23-3:6

Thirty-six years ago I took my first train ride on the Indian Subcontinent. A thin, elderly man stood next to the passenger car where I was boarding. His skin was dark from many years under the sun. His forehead was deeply creased, as were his cheeks and neck.

We all know there's a special beauty in the soft, smooth skin of infants—living miracles to see and touch. And yet, there is an equal and different beauty among the aged, for they have endured the heat—literally and figuratively. Their bodies and souls have weathered the storms of life. And their skin is simply…and silently telling the truth of it all.

The train station in New Delhi was noisy and chaotic, like most stations I had passed through as a young man. However, there was something unique about this place. *And it was for sale*…at an incredibly small price. The elderly man was selling it…to passengers…like me.

St. Paul did not have an easy 'go of it' when it came to the Corinthians. They had money and privilege. *And*…they had their own ideas about things…ideas that were different from some of the ideas Paul was proclaiming. In today's excerpt from his second letter to that congregation, St. Paul wants it to be clear that he is <u>not</u> promoting himself. His singular focus is proclaiming the Good News about the love of Jesus Christ.

And Paul takes them…*and us*…all the way back…to the *beginning* when he writes: "It is the God who created the *Cosmos*. It is the Creator who said, 'Let light shine *out of darkness*.' It is **this** *same God* who has shone the light in *our hearts*. We have been *gifted* with the light of *knowing the glory of God* in the compassionate face of Jesus Christ."

That loving face which endured the heat—literally and figuratively. That *beautiful face* which weathered the worst kinds of storms imaginable. That sacred head, sorely wounded…silently tells the truth of it all. And the truth is *this*: God will stop at *nothing*…to save us from one another…and from ourselves. Christ was willing to die *so that we*…might live.

There was a slender rope around the back of the old man's neck. It extended downward and outward in both directions, where it was knotted on the far corners of a thin plywood surface. His makeshift platter was filled with about two dozen crude, little teacups—nothing fancy…none of them were glazed or decorated or even smoothly shaped. They were all *handmade from clay*, baked solid under the heat of the sun.

"Chai!" he called out. "Hot, delicious chai!" I passed nearby and smelled the spiced tea, steaming hot from a kettle he held in his right hand.

"How much?" I asked, digging into my pocket. I presented a palm full of Rupees, and he took fewer than I expected, before dramatically pouring my chai into one of those small clay cups. It was *so worth it*—even for the theatre of the moment…and for the sweet smell of that spice…not to mention the delicious drink.

St. Paul wanted the wealthy and privileged members of the Corinthian congregation to see that the beauty of the Gospel about the love of Jesus Christ…it's like a *priceless treasure*. And, *ironically*, God does not hide this priceless treasure in some secret vault. Nope.

Instead, God has poured the love of Christ into *our* flawed and broken human hearts. Or as Paul literally writes: "*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."

The problem with the religious people in today's Gospel story is that they want to wield this extraordinary power that belongs to *God* as if it were a *hammer*…that belonged to *them*. I mean, there's no *question* that Jesus' disciples broke the Law. It was flat out *illegal* to gather food on the Sabbath. Remember back in the desert with Moses when God rained down *twice as much Manna* on *Friday* so that the Children of Israel could gather enough for that day *and for the Sabbath Day*?

But here's the point that Jesus makes. The Law was given as a *gift* in order to illuminate a way for *regular people* to experience *Shalom*—peace—at *least* one day a week. The Law was *not given* so that religious people who look *down* on other people could just *hammer them* into submission.

Frankly, that is an essential *part of the point* we just heard from the Book of Deuteronomy. Remember how the LORD commanded the most powerful people to *back off?* As we just heard, the holiness of the Sabbath requires fortunate people not only to be *personally righteous*. It also requires them to *extend the gift of Shalom* to each child, to every single slave, even your animals, *and* the foreign immigrants who live all around you.

So, does it sound like God wants the powerful to hammer the weak into submission? Or…does God *also want* to give the poor and marginalized the gift of peace?

Y'all the extraordinary power of God—whether written in the Ten Commandments or revealed in the righteous life of Jesus Christ—this treasure was never meant to *reserved* for the benefit of the few. This treasure *certainly* was never meant to be <u>mis</u>-used as a *weapon* by the few.

This treasure is given to *all people*. This love is poured out for *all people*. This beautiful glory of God is intended to be a *gift* for the *whole world*. As we heard last Sunday, God *so loved* the world that he gave his only Son—the Righteous <u>One</u> for the *unrighteous many*.

And that's why Jesus is so stinkin' angry in today's Gospel lesson. That's why Jesus chooses to *show* the religious people a thing or two—and not just out in the grainfields or out in the street, but *right inside* the synagogue…*on the Sabbath Day*. That's where and when Jesus chooses to reveal the blessing *that God intends*, through the miraculous *work* that he *does*.

Our Lord chooses "do-something-goodness" over "do-nothing-judgment" *every single time!* Treasure *in* clay jars…treasure *for* clay jars. The perfect gifts of God…for the *imperfect* people of God.

Miracle of miracles…I found an empty seat on that crowded train! So, I set my small, clay cup of piping hot chai onto the window ledge and removed my backpack, hoisting it up onto the overhead shelf. I took my seat and enjoyed sipping on the chai as I waited for our departure. I finished my drink as the train began to ease *slowly* out of the station.

But then I wasn't sure what to *do with my cup* for the next four hours. The person across from me gestured, waving his hand toward the open window. "I'm not going to *litter*!" I thought to myself. "I'm not gonna' just throw my empty cup out the window."

But then I realized, that's the way it's *designed*—all natural…*like us*—a clay container, *good enough* to hold a very special treasure for a while…and then to be returned to the earth.

The clay cups serve their purpose. Human souls and bodies *also serve a purpose*. We are invited to serve as vessels of God's grace…and as magnifiers of Christ's Light which has been shone in our hearts.

I stood up in place with my face next to the open window. Tossing my cup, I watched as it broke into small pieces. And mine was not the only one. Looking up the length of the train, there were lots of clay cups being tossed out—returned to the earth. All natural! It was actually kind of *joyful thing* if you want to know the truth.

When we celebrate a Requiem for someone who has died, there is a final commendation spoken by the priest and the people who are there to say good-bye to their beloved. I pray, "Give rest, O Christ, to your servant with your saints,"

The people continue, "where sorrow and pain are no more, neither sighing but life everlasting."

And then I get to acknowledge the truth: "You *only* are immortal (O God), the Creator…of (hu)mankind. And we are mortal, formed of the earth, and to earth shall we return. All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia."

Y'all, we get to proclaim, "Alleluia!" even at the grave, because St. Paul is right. The love of God has been poured into our hearts. And it's an *absolute treasure*—<u>meant to be savored</u> *and* to be *generously shared*.

It's not for the righteous few; it is for *everybody* who wants it. The *Shalom*—the peace of God which surpasses all our understanding—it's not locked away in some secret vault.

It is meant for *clay jars*…for *regular*, *imperfect people*. The God who brought light to the universe, shines within us *too*. And you cannot mistake this Light because it comes from the radiant glory we can see in the compassionate, weathered face of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.