

We hold treasure within us—the holy blessing of God’s grace. That’s the promise God’s Spirit brought to believers at Pentecost. That’s the purpose—for each of us and all together—throughout this season of Pentecost. Like light in the darkness, beaming through our hearts, our lives, God’s love in Christ extends to more and more people. Human life flourishes. All creation flourishes. That’s the glory of God!

We hold the blessed treasure of Sacred Grace within us like clay jars, Paul says. Pottery. Now we like pottery in our family. I married into appreciating its beauty, beyond mere functionality. Each unique piece shaped by hands of humans, most of whom we’ll never know. Yet we cherish it, in the way we long to be shaped by God—human clay in the loving hands of our Divine Potter.

It’s a nice image. Except I’m not very good at pottery. Middle School art class. I made a pyramid shaped piece, pressing strings of clay one atop another like a log home. Supposed to be a vessel to hold things. But then it’s little use when the top opening turns out so small not much actually fits in. Then cracks formed along those logs. It fell apart and got thrown away. And that whole bowl on a spinning wheel bit ended in collapse. I watched a woman in the park yesterday. I’m grateful God works much more like her than me!

I’m a little better at fixing pottery with super glue! I’ve had plenty of opportunities with broken pieces! Handles snapped off cups. Mixing bowls glued back together

from multiple shards. Each chip or crack a unique mark, a memory, an expression of life along the way. Some imperfections I remember with chagrin! The origins of others remain a complete mystery.

I wonder what people did in ancient cultures, long before super glue. Like with the shards pictured on our bulletin. Bits of humanity. Beauty. Mystery. Suzanne and I brought them back from Petra, Jordan twenty years ago. Rims and handles from large jars. An almost intact top of a smaller vessel, maybe a simple oil lamp. Bottoms of other pieces. And one small shard, probably a plate, with decorative paint in lines and dots still visible. All from the Roman era when people walked and talked with Jesus, and Paul spoke and wrote, and God's grace extended to more and more people.

We hold the blessed treasure of grace and love, we are like clay jars, Paul says. Beauty. Personality. Practical functionality. And fragility. You see, Paul could have imagined us as an iron box, or a piece made of fine silver or gold. Truth is, human life is more vulnerable. Not always shiny. We crack or break. We don't last forever. Not exactly a super secure, thick-walled, fire-safe, multiple dead-bolted vault in which our society tries to protect our most precious treasures.

If you're like me, we keep working hard to be healthy, happy, to have a good life—serving, sharing it with others. We try to make it last for ... well forever, if we could. Yet, friends, we are fragile vessels of God's presence and power. Our bodies break or go haywire. Our minds wither. Our relationships crack and fall apart. Our way of life in business, school, church, community gets shattered into shards by forces beyond our choice or personal control. Companies go bankrupt. Banks fail. Economies bust. Hurricanes blow. Volcanoes erupt. People fire guns in schools, at concerts, in workplaces, in churches. Famine and war devastate whole regions of the world. Society changes. Time inevitably takes a toll. So much variety of adversity

resists our best efforts to extend God's grace like an ancient oil lamp radiating light in darkness; like Jesus turning huge clay jars of water into wine for a wedding feast.

We are afflicted, Paul writes, perplexed, persecuted, struck down. We know Jesus' death in all the ways we experience loss; and in all the ways we intentionally, unselfishly, sacrificially give of ourselves and embody service as he did. Indeed, friends, at times our hearts grow full of heaviness. Yet, we're not destroyed or driven to despair. We are not crushed or forsaken. In us, God works resurrection!

Paul trusted that power in his relations with the people of Corinth. Best we know, there were people who talked a good game. Sort of hucksters of heaven with armor-plated platitudes. Peddlers of perfect life with God, delivered with Teflon-polished confidence. They likely had highly prized social connections and impressive recommendations. But ultimately, their game was about their own gain. I'll leave it to you to discern whether it's true in our time! Paul says, that's not the way God works. The Gospel of Holy Love is made real through fragility, humility, practicality. God is with us precisely in our adversity, bringing hope and new possibility for life.

That's really what the story of Samuel is all about. Eli's clay jar is old and chipped. His family who should follow him, break into shards of selfishness. It's a hard time for the whole nation in a hostile neighborhood. Military threats. Uncertain prosperity. Yet, we're told, the lamp of God is not yet out. God remains with the people. God calls to the boy Samuel. Three times (a little touch of Hebrew humor). With Shakespearean irony, when Samuel starts speaking, the Divine Voice censures of Eli's sons. They die. Israel gets defeated. You see, life is not always a picnic. Yet through Samuel, God's lamp shines in the darkness. Saul, David, other characters Samuel calls to God's way will be far from perfect. Still holy grace, love, life persist in all times and places. As John begins the gospel story of Jesus: God's light shines

in the darkness and despite many ways the clay jars of our lives crack and break, darkness will not overcome it.

If Paul wrote today and tried to connect with contemporary life, I imagine he'd send an email. And he'd say we hold this treasure of grace in cell phones. Fragile cell phones that are prone to breaking. Like this one. It's amazing how God speaks, and says, what are you working on there? Human brokenness? Here, let me help you think about that! This phone was in a durable case. Still got put in a bag and keys or something hit the screen just right. Not it will work momentarily if you press really hard and work your hands up and bend it a little. My ingenious son figured out that routine. Funny thing is we got this phone from someone else among us a couple of years, broken at the time, new screen put on. Voila!

Two years later, broken again. Wanting to save a buck we go on Craigslist. Now we've had marvelous success through Craigslist with everything from an iPad to cymbals to multiple cars that had been salvaged. So we're off to watch the sunset at Lake Michigan Friday night, and meet someone along the way. We're careful about scams. And truth be told, a few little warning bells went off with this one. But the phone had been factory reset, seemed clean and was restarting properly ... so we closed the deal. Sure enough, broken ... cunning, falsifying humanity.

So what to do with this experience? We process our emotions of frustration, loss. We think of what practical good various possibilities would do. Where is blessing in this brokenness? Suzanne says, we'll pray for the guy. God speaks! We hope he really needed our money, and it doesn't just go for drugs. And I went back to this sermon ... blessing amid broken shards of life as God would want it. A couple of ideas came to me in the night. I'll post on that same Craigslist that we have the phone. And if someone lost theirs or had it stolen, call us we just want to return it to you. And I'll post a warning to others in the area about the guy we met with. I have

no idea if it will do any good. Maybe in some small way someone will be advised by our adversity, and grace may extend to more people to the glory of God.

Friends, God wants all our phones and jars and lives to be filled with joy, goodness, meaningful service, peace. We are created to thrive. Divine glory is humanity and creation fully alive. But God knows often we need a little repair.

Chrissy told me this week about a centuries old Japanese method of repairing pottery called *kintsugi*. It combines belief that there's beauty in what's flawed or imperfect, that nothing should be wasted, and accepting change. Broken pottery gets pieced together by epoxy laced with gold, silver, or platinum. So *kintsugi*, or golden repair, makes a piece shine more beautifully than when it was newly unblemished.

It's surely much better than my menial efforts with super glue! Then we face situations seemingly impossible to repair. Shards all jumbled, strewn apart. Like those pieces we brought home from Petra.

My heart still gets a bit heavier and disquieted when I look at them, and hold them. You see, it was not the high point of my married life. After a guided tour in the morning, we had the afternoon on our own. Three possible places to go. Two up mountain high places, one over a hill to the area with the pottery. I wasn't as sensitive as I could have been that day. Enthralled with seeing as much as possible, I ran up both mountain high places. Suzanne felt like I left her in the dust ... like those shards she found. As beautiful and mysterious is that rose-red city carved from cliffs of sandstone and clay, my memory is forever colored by the fissure between us. I wish I could go back and repair the experience.

Speaking for myself, these broken pieces remind me of other brokenness between us over the years since. We've faced adversity—some of our creation, some beyond

our culpability. Like Eli and many other families, it's a chronic biblical condition. Yet, these broken pieces remind me of grace—God's patient, persistent, unfailing, forgiving love that keeps us together, giving me light of hope in dark nights of the soul. Enabling us to raise a family over 21 years since. Grace beyond our poor plans or control, extending to our children, to our wider families and work places, and more and more people to the glory of God.

Grace. The blessing which claims us at baptism. Like water held in the vessel of the font. The blessing which nourishes us every time we come to the table. Like fruit of vine in the vessel of our clay chalices. In a few moments, we'll come to share communion, a tangible reminder of grace in our lives. As we approach we're reminded of how fragile we are as vessels of Holy Love. Maybe this blessing of grace will begin to repair our broken heart, our broken relationships, our broken world in *kintsugi* style. Maybe the light of God's glory will glint brightly off our cracks glued and gaps filled to other people feeling especial fragile right now. People waiting in the darkness, longing for light.

Like ancient clay oil lamps, dear friends, we're called to burn brightly in our world "so that grace may extend to more and more people." Even through our fragility and adversity trust that God's grace endures. The same power of love that raised Jesus to new life when he was sealed in a tomb, persists through even in our darkest hour. I believe this Holy Love will last for ... well, forever. And we will be held in it, even long after our bodies and life stories end up like shards from Petra. "We have this treasure in clay jars, so it may be clear: this heavenly power belongs to God and not to us." Dearly beloved kin in Christ, that's good news to heal our hearts the next time we crack or break. That's good news to remember when we fill our cups at this table and others at home that are chipped or missing a handle.

Thanks be to God. Amen.