

Broken Treasure
II Corinthians 4: 1-18

Once again Paul found himself in the midst of yet another Corinthian dispute, one that as happens often in arguments, began on one issue and quickly devolved into an entirely different discussion. As also occurs frequently we don't really know what precipitated the flurry of passionate exchange between Paul and the church in Corinth. An anonymous person committed an equally unknown offense, leading to rebuke from the Corinthian body. Paul did not disagree with the action but additionally called for forgiveness and reconciliation as a reflection of their faith in Christ. "This punishment by the majority is enough for such a person; so now instead you should forgive and console him, so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I urge you to reaffirm your love for him."¹ The people of Corinth, in a biting response to the one who had taught them about Jesus and organized them into a community of faith, turned on him in a fury. The person and his alleged wrong were forgotten and even the internal divisions of the church were sublimated as they solidified and directed their anger and scorn to Paul's effectiveness and credibility. Paul's ministry and Paul as a person of honor and integrity were at stake in the battle of words that ensued.

Honor and appearance were at the core of the first-century world of Corinth, Greece. When Paul spoke of forgiveness for this unknown person for whatever offense had been committed, it went against the proud Graeco-Roman view of honor. The man had already been publicly shamed, the ultimate in societal rejection. In the culture it was not uncommon for such humiliation to lead to the deep sorrow of which Paul wrote, to withdrawal from community, even to suicide. To us, it might seem extreme, but such a public dressing down of an individual was the source of deep shame - for the person involved and for the entire community. There had been just such a dramatic response to loss of honor about a century earlier when Mark Antony committed suicide after a failed attempt to oppose Caesar's legal heir, a person by the name of

¹ II Corinthians 2: 6-8 NRSV

Augustus Caesar. Yes, that same Augustus Caesar from the story of the birth of Jesus. Cleopatra, shamed by both Mark Antony's loss and her relationship with him, followed suit. That is how deeply embedded was the role of honor in the Graeco-Roman world. If someone were so shamed, forgiveness and reconciliation would not be considered even a remote possibility. To do so would be considered even more shameful. Yet it was Jesus who Paul was following when he encouraged healing and coming together. Jesus had said, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven."² Paul, in spite of his Roman citizenship and his Hellenistic identity believed in Jesus' radical and illogical call to forgive as the cornerstone for the survival and health of community and the Body of Christ. It was as strange and foreign a concept to the Corinthians as it would be if we were to encourage our children to aim for the lowest-paying job possible in life. To forgive was to accept dishonor and shame. Rather than struggling with this extreme concept of forgiveness and what it meant for their living, something that continues to be an ongoing discussion for us as well, the Corinthians attacked Paul.

Initially, their criticism was focused on what Paul had done in sending Timothy who, in their eyes, was a dismal failure. Continuing to deflect from the issue of forgiveness and reconciliation, they turned their collective ire to Paul. Hurling their worse insults at him, they accused Paul of deceit and weakness. Though he wrote forceful, commanding letters that rallied everyone to faith, in person Paul was a disappointment. "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible."³ This was in a time experiencing the revival of the great orators and philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates. It was a world in which *oral* complex rhetoric and elegantly crafted arguments were valued and demanded as an art and skill. Though Paul could write a most credible essay that met the high standards of rhetoric, the reality of Paul belied his written graceful sophistication. In

² Luke 6: 37 NRSV

³ II Corinthians 10:10 NRSV

a document from around 150 AD, not quite a century after this letter to the Corinthians, Paul was described as "a man small in size, bald-headed, crooked thighs [bow-legged], well-built, with eyebrows meeting, rather long-nosed...."⁴ His physical appearance did not meet the lofty Greek standard of a powerful orator, and his oral speech was mild, understated. Paul was a failure, and the Corinthians were questioning why they should listen to someone who was so obviously lacking in what was needed and important.

Paul's argument pleading his own case was in the style of those great orators of Greece. Masterfully, he referred to Moses whose own speech deficiencies caused him to question his ability to lead God's people out of Egypt. He did not deny the accusations made by the Corinthians. Instead using the premise that God does indeed use the most unlikely, Paul proceeded to justify himself as grounded in God's grace that makes the impossible possible. "But 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."⁵ Through the lenses of society Paul was an abysmal letdown and did not look or speak like their idea of success and respect, but by the grace of God Paul and his passion for the gospel were valuable indeed.

There is much being bandied about these days concerning what it means to appear and be Christian. To be Christian is to follow certain rules in fear of the inevitable judgment that accompanies failure. It is to meet specific expectations, dressing a particular way, sometimes even voting a party line. The arguments that have developed rival the flash and aplomb of the best of World Wrestling Entertainment. As with the situation between Paul and the Corinthians, these surface discussions are often cover-ups for the greater challenge. Instead of grappling with the more significant issues of justice and reconciliation and the reality that we are *all* more clay jars than treasures, we become entangled in a war of words and emotions creating one diversion after another deflecting our attention from the call of the Gospel. Such distractions

⁴ from *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* as found in www.christiantimelines.com/Paul's%20physcal%20description.htm.

⁵ II Corinthians 4: & NRSV

abound these days! It is painful as our attention is sharply drawn from one crisis to another in blinding jerks. Lies and truth are tossed together and thrown around like confetti. Justice is demeaned and belittled as a sign of weakness. Wherever you stand on the political spectrum, it is all quite overwhelming. It is discouraging. It is exhausting. And it causes us all to feel so inadequate. What does faith have to do with all this craziness in which we live? Paul would reply - everything, absolutely everything. For when our entire world seems upside down, when demanding tentacles pull at us to do *something*, when we feel so inadequate for what lies before us, that is when we turn to a faith grounded in the loving grace of God that offers us hope.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, it was to remind them of God's love as lived out in Jesus Christ - a love that took shape in the search for justice and reconciliation for all, a love that became reality in a community of faith in which forgiveness was the norm not the exception, a love that is reflected as the impossible becomes possible and value is discovered in what is considered most unworthy. It seems a daunting and improbable task to remember that grace always tempers justice and to remember that our goal is reconciliation not walls of separation. The most arduous task, however, could very well be the call to love and accept ourselves and others with all our imperfections and inadequacies, releasing them in trust to God. The Confession of 1967 was developed out of the unrest and divisions that gripped the church and country during those turbulent years. In a time when chaos clamored for attention, C67 defiantly proclaimed, "We believe that the new life takes shape in a community in which we know that God loves and accepts us in spite of what we are. We therefore accept ourselves and love others, knowing that no one has any ground on which to stand except God's grace."⁶ It is a humbling and imposing task to look at ourselves and others, acknowledging the brokenness that is in all of us, and accept God's gift of grace that leads to new life.

⁶ *The Confession of 1967*. Liturgical text. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of Theology and Worship, 2002.

One of the most profound lies of our times is that to follow Christ is simple and straightforward, even easy and immediately rewarding. As the Corinthians and succeeding generations have discovered, it is far from it. To look at our complex, deeply nuanced world that appears spectacularly splintered and voraciously demanding and try to understand what Jesus would do is the project of a lifetime - for individuals, for communities of faith, for the Church. It can be so disheartening as we struggle to hear God's voice and then turn our beliefs to action. Paul did not have the technology that would send his letters to millions around the world. He did not meet societal standards of success, beauty, and honor. He knew full well that he was not considered worthy or even acceptable. Despite opposition and scorn from friends and enemies alike, though, he persisted in the message that the ways of God were decidedly *not* what the world expected. He believed in God's hope and grace to transform individuals, communities, the world. The life of this ill-suited and apparently most unattractive Roman Jewish tentmaker reflected that of Jesus himself. Yes, our world is vastly different from first-century Greece, but who we are and how we live as those who profess to follow Christ has not changed. We look at causes Paul could not have imagined, and our lives take shape in ways he never could have known; yet still our grounding and center remain in loving and graceful justice and in the beautiful strength of a diverse community that dares to struggle with the difficult issues of faith. Through it all we keep our eyes wide open and focused on the hope of what God can and will do. Paul's words to the Corinthians still have profound meaning to us today:

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.⁷

The Corinthians lost sight of the message of Jesus Christ and became mired in inconsequential controversy that prevented them from seeing the more encompassing task of being the Body of Christ in the world. We cannot afford to do the same.

⁷ II Corinthians 4: 16-18 NRSV

Many years ago I learned this hymn, one we don't sing often, but one that sings so clearly of what it means to follow God in a world filled with demands and expectations that can never be met and one dominated by distractions that can so easily deflect our call. Listen to them now as our prayer:

In all the tensions of my life between my faith and doubt
Let your great Spirit give me hope, sustain me, lead me out.
So, help me in my unbelief and let my life be true.
Feet firmly planted on the earth, my sights set high on you.⁸

Amen.

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⁸ verses 3 and 4 of *When I Came Into This Life*. music: American folk melody. Words: Fred Kaan, 1976. © 1979. The Hymn Society of America, Texas Christian University, Forth Worth, Texas.