August 23, 2020 • 12th Sunday after Pentecost • Online Worship

“More Than Meets the Eye: Something Within Me”
Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

2 Corinthians 4:6-11
For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. 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.

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.

This morning we begin a new four-part sermon series based in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians called “More Than Meets the Eye.” We’ll be exploring together God’s love and power at work in us and in our world even, or maybe I should say, especially when we don’t see or perceive it.

Let’s remember that Paul is writing to new Christians at a time when the church was just forming. And what a place Corinth was! Hardly somewhere you might think it likely to start a new church. New Christians, new church, very challenging setting. Paul knows how their faith was being tested, again and again, and he strives to build them up. To build them up in the power and love of God so that they might live faithful lives, worthy lives, lives that testify to the promises of God.

What was Corinth like? It was a seaport—cosmopolitan, diverse, composed of people from many different ethnic backgrounds, lifestyles, and religious beliefs. Its residents were far from being of one mind or one purpose or one faith. A center of commerce, it was also the center of a significant slave trade, and of “loose morals” we might say. Rough and tumble. A place where some prospered, but many lived on the edge. It was a big city, not an easy place in which to find one’s way for all those who had come from small villages where faith and norms were held in common. Life in Corinth could seem strange, perplexing, overwhelming, dangerous even.

Life could seem strange, perplexing, overwhelming, dangerous even. Doesn’t that description strike a chord in us in these pandemic times? So many things that we took for granted have changed. From wearing a mask on a morning walk to negotiating the start of a new school year. From spending time with extended family to planning a vacation to sorting out how to work and rest and raise children at home. Life can seem strange, perplexing, overwhelming, dangerous...

As Paul describes what life was like for those early believers in Corinth, might he not also be describing how we can sometimes feel in these times: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed…”

We’re not so different from the early Corinthians. Now as then we ask: where do we find God in the midst of all this? Paul’s answer seems to be that God finds us. God finds us in our weakness. God finds us in our anxiety and our fear. God finds us in our daily lives. God gives us strength, courage, and even glimpses of joy.

Paul uses some wonderful images to describe this, to bring it alive for us. “We have this treasure in clay jars,” he writes. Clay jars are fragile, easily chipped or broken. And yet, in humble clay jars is found the greatest treasure of all, the pearl of great price, the mystery of God’s love for us in Christ Jesus. “We have this treasure in clay jars,” he writes, “so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” “For it is God who said: ‘let the light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

God finds us in our weakness. God finds us in our anxiety and our fear. God finds us in our daily lives.

God finds us when we are open and centered and expect God to show up. God gives us strength, courage, and even glimpses of joy, pouring all of that into the clay jars that are our lives until our cup overflows with goodness and mercy.

I recently read about how groups of nuns are living through the pandemic. For the most part, they report continuing to do what they always do—praying, working in the garden, looking out for one another, especially their more elderly sisters. “Eat, Pray, Love,” one put it, finding humor from a book by that title popular a few years ago. Some have gone further. They’ve taken their prayers online. They’re ringing the bell of their church to remind the community to find strength in prayer. They’re sewing masks and donating them to the places of greatest need.
I love their spirit—one of constancy, of mutual support, of looking for moments of laughter and joy amidst it all.

I recently checked in with one of our families with young children to see how they are doing, especially with this crazy school year approaching. The mom replied: “We are doing absolutely fine by staying flexible and adapting to a whole new way of life. Our focus is on staying healthy and safe and also joyful. Our oldest has learned how to bake following instructions on a ZOOM baking class. Our youngest has learned how to ride a bike. And we’re approaching everything with joy…”

Wow. That was my spiritual lift that day. A lovely reminder to stay focused on what God is doing in me, in us, in our church family…. “We have this treasure in clay jars,” Paul writes, “so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” “For it is God who said: ‘let the light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

I don’t know about you, but I know that, from time to time, I need to be called back to that joy and that life-giving power of God’s love. I need what we might call a “spiritual accelerometer” to vibrate in my heart and remind me to pay attention to where God is showing up in my life in that moment. You know, like the accelerometers on our phones that sense signals that an earthquake might be happening and let us know. I’ll confess that I don’t have one on my old phone, and I don’t think I want one. Life can be scary enough these days without an earthquake warning added on.

But a spiritual accelerometer? I’ll take one of those. “Hey, wake up,” I need to hear God calling. More than meets the eye is going on here. “I’ve put my treasure in the clay jar that is you. I’ve made light to shine in the darkness. Pay attention. Give thanks. Keep going!...and Smile!” Let your eyes smile above the top of your mask.

Pope Francis puts it this way: “Allow yourself to be amazed. Do we let ourselves be surprised?” he asks. “Because the encounter with the Lord,” he says, “is always a living encounter, not an encounter in a museum.”

God’s presence and power within us, that amazing unmerited gift of grace, redirects us over and over again into that hope that is beyond measure and beyond human telling. Something powerful lies within us, strengthening us for all that lies ahead. God has filled up to overflowing the clay jars of our lives.

In a few minutes, you’ll hear Vera sing it in this morning’s Offertory, Duke Ellington’s beautiful hymn “Come Sunday”: “Lord, dear Lord above, God Almighty, God of love, please look down and see my people through… I believe God is now, was then, and always will be. With God’s blessing we can make it through eternity.”

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Notes
