

June 10, 2012 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday After Pentecost 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* the centaur Firenze replaces Sibyll Trelawney (a human) as the divination teacher at Hogwarts. Here are some excerpts from his first lesson, "Sibyll Trelawney wastes her time, in the main, on the self-flattering nonsense humans call fortune telling... Trivial hurts, tiny human accidents, these are of no more significance than the scurrying of ants to the wide universe and are unaffected by planetary movements." (Page 603)

This is a good place to start engaging our second Bible reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians. I find, on the whole, many people have a pretty elevated understanding of themselves, even when they are before God. How often do we hear people say things like: "I'm sure God has a purpose..." "God was watching over my surgery..." "There must be something God wants her to accomplish or else he wouldn't have protected her"? These thoughts don't necessarily have to be wrong, but underneath them is often a subtle assumption that God is managing each person's life in a way that raises him or her above the nitty-gritty of reality.

Here's a healthier starting place. Our second reading is an excerpt from Paul's letter to the church in Corinth. Before the part we read Paul had written, "But we have this treasure [meaning the light of Christ] in clay jars, so that it may be clear that is extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." (2 Corinthians 4:7) Perhaps the more fully we can grasp that we are clay jars, and that our lives are really nothing more than the scurrying of ants in the wide universe, the more fully we are awestruck by God's grace for us.

In Paul's day clay jars were the equivalent of paper cups and plates. They were disposable. You used them once, perhaps twice and then you pitched them. I don't say this about ourselves to depress us, but if you think of yourself as a silver chalice you think you're entitled to bear the finest of wine. If you think of yourself as one of those little paper Dixie cups then you're amazed and astounded when someone chooses you as his or her wine glass.

Here's the truth. Paul writes in verse 16 of our lesson, "...our outer nature is wasting away..." We are dust. Martin Luther wasn't being falsely humble when he used to call himself

a "bag of worms" or "poor stinking maggot fodder that I am." He was stating reality. In the grand scheme of the universe none of us are powerful at all. You can throw the biggest temper tantrum you'd like, and stomp your feet and scream yourself hoarse, but you aren't going to get this planet to budge one inch in its orbit. We could collectively detonate every explosive and nuclear device ever created and it might give this planet the merest wobble.

We simply aren't very powerful. We are the scurrying of ants to the wide universe. We are clay jars.

My one cousin is the principle of an elementary school. He tells me he is getting increasingly frustrated with all the effort that is put into building confidence in kids and raising their self-esteem. He says what are we really accomplishing when we give a kid a trophy for simply participating? In adult life you don't get trophies just for showing up. What are they going to expect when they grow up? He also notes that most of those kids are never going to be *the best* at anything. There will always been someone else more talented, smarter, or better

looking. If I can impose my theological thoughts on it - we are clay jars.

He says instead of working so hard to build self-confidence and self-esteem we should be focusing on developing a sense of self-worth and dignity in kids. And you don't build that by giving them trophies or awards. You do that by letting them know that somebody cares. When he is hiring a new teacher the key quality he is looking for is does this person care about the kids? Can this person honor the sacred trust this community is going to give him or her to influence their children?

We are clay jars, and somebody cares. The more you can grasp your nature as a clay jar the more fully you can appreciate that somebody cares. That somebody is God.

In our St. John's Welcome Book under the theology section we have the line, "Christians should not let cultural trends, advertisements, or other people define who they are. 'Who a person is,' is defined by God and God alone."

Okay, I've belabored that point long enough. God has chosen our "clay jar-ness" to be the vehicles to convey his gracious nature - quite an honor. What does this actually mean for our lives.

It means that we are valuable because God makes us valuable. It is not a value that we possess ourselves. And in terms of conveying God's gracious nature, let's not sink ourselves before we even get started. Live by the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

The world needs more of all of those qualities. And right now the Holy Spirit is working all of those qualities in you. Within your death-bound frailty it is hard at work building something eternal.

Notice Paul never tells the Corinthians their bodies are worthless. He doesn't tell them: Who cares? It's all just rot so do whatever you want. No. He says within their outer nature the inner nature is being renewed day by day.

God has chosen to build in you. That building project won't make you invincible. It also won't protect you from feeling pain, getting hurt or even wrongfully killed. It is, however, an eternal value housed in your clay jar.

When I was in high school I had a friend who was a shift manager at a McDonalds restaurant. Sometimes I'd pick him up right from McDonalds at the end of his shift. If it was a late night shift he'd sometimes have to take the day's cash and deposit it at a local bank. When this happened the usual policy was for me to meet him in the restaurant. Then we'd get into the car and go through the drive through; except we didn't order food. When it came our turn at the window they'd pass a food bag out to us with the money bag hidden inside. That way no one knew that the day's receipts had just left. After one particularly busy day we picked up the money and headed to the bank. After dropping it in the night deposit slot my friend said to me, "I'm not supposed to talk about the money but there was \$39,000 in cash in that bag." -real value hidden in a paper bag.

Rejoice in what God is doing in you. Rejoice and be glad.  
God is preparing for you an eternal weight of glory beyond all  
measure. Amen