

The Pearls We Are

By Linda Rex

June 2, 2024, Proper 4 | After Pentecost—In the New Testament passage for this Sunday, 2 Corinthians 4:5–12, the apostle Paul shows how God the Light-Giver, is the One who shone in our hearts, enabling us to see God’s glory in the face of Jesus Christ. It is Christ in us by the Spirit, who enables us to live despite the death we constantly experience day by day as those who serve Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul inevitably experienced some sort of suffering or death for the sake of the gospel. But it was amid this and through this that the life of Jesus was made manifest to those around him. Indeed, as Jesus taught us, when we die to ourselves, to the things of our flesh, that is when we truly live. It is when we are broken as followers of Christ and are living in union and communion with our Triune God, that the light of God shines most brightly in and through us.

Paul describes the indwelling presence of God through Jesus by the Spirit as “treasure in earthen vessels” (NASB) or “treasure in jars of clay” (NIV, ESV) or “treasure in earthen vessels” (NKJV). These translators used a picture of a treasure being placed in a clay pot or earthen vessel which was fragile and could be easily broken. *Word Studies in the New Testament* points us to the story in Judges 7, where one night, Gideon took his army out against a massive Midianite army. Gideon’s army had been reduced by God down to only three hundred men, and they were facing an army which the writer of Judges described as numerous as locusts, without number.

According to this story, at the critical moment, they surrounded their camp on all sides. Note—there were only three hundred men who had clay pitchers with torches in one hand and a sword in the other. When signaled, these soldiers broke their clay pitchers, allowing the light to shine through, and they shouted, “A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!” As the story goes, the enemy was put into disarray and the enemy soldiers turned against one another, so that in the end, they destroyed themselves. Gideon’s army needed only pick off the stragglers. As you can see in this story, the broken vessels provided the light by which the enemy was defeated, even without Gideon’s army needing to raise their swords in battle.

There is something powerful about light penetrating a dark space. Indeed, it can be almost blinding when breaking in unexpectedly. God has poured out his Spirit, inviting us to open ourselves up to his indwelling presence, allowing the bright light of his divine presence to penetrate the inner darkness of our false selves, to illuminate us with the reality of our true selves, hidden with Christ in God. The Spirit’s presence and power at work in and through our broken, flawed human flesh is a beautiful reflection of God’s glory revealed in Jesus Christ. When we allow this light to shine into us and out through us, Jesus Christ becomes manifest to those around us. The darkness of this world is penetrated by the light of Jesus through us as broken, fragile vessels in whom the Spirit dwells.

The Mirror Bible gives another nuance to this picture. Where the other translations focus on vessels or jars of clay, the Mirror Bible indicates this particular Greek word *ostrakinos* has its root in the word *ostrakon*, meaning “oyster”. In other words, the original Greek gives the sense of treasure in a shell or oyster, which gives us an entirely different picture to consider. When an oyster has a piece of sand or sediment enter its shell, it can be destructive or damaging to the creature. But it slowly wraps the errant item in a special substance, and over time, the oyster forms it into a glorious pearl. What is meant for death becomes a new creation, one that is beautiful and of great value.

As human beings, we often avoid pain, suffering, and seek to avoid death at all costs. We especially do our best to avoid dying to our sin, our self, and our own will. But Paul uses these pictures to show us that God is always at work in and through us by his Spirit. What is meant for

our death and destruction God redeems and transforms into that which is glorious and beautiful and which will last forever. It's all in realizing and receiving the magnificent gift God has given us in Christ and his heavenly Spirit. When we daily allow God to wrap up our death to self and dying to sin and self-will in the life of his Son by the Spirit, we become a light to the world around us, a gift as precious as a pearl to those whom God draws himself through Christ in the Spirit. This gives a whole new direction and meaning to our daily "deaths" we must die for Christ's sake. For suddenly, we as broken, fragile humans, find ourselves as valuable and treasured participants in God's redeeming work as he restores, renews, and transforms his world. And all we can do is give thanks.

Dear Father, Jesus, Spirit, thank you for including us in what you are doing in this world. Grant us the grace to die each day to self that you may live more fully in and through us, for the sake of others. Enable us to glow brightly with the glory of Christ our Lord, that your light may more fully penetrate and illumine this darkened world, through Jesus and by your Spirit. Amen.

"For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death works in us, but life in you." 2
Corinthians 4:5–12 NASB