

Ash Wednesday Meditation  
“Dust and Clay”  
II Corinthians 4:7-2  
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There is a time for everything... Ecclesiastes  
It's that time again...ashes...dust

Cycle...

More than a cycle...a journey...with a destination...

Dust...clay jar...jar gets beaten up pretty bad in the course of living

According to Paul...a time to suffer, get shipwrecked

Covid...a time...

If this earthly house...if this clay jar...we have a home

More...more...

Emily Glover...day she died a house was torn down right across the  
street

One day there would be a new house

Yes indeed

Today...dust to dust

Dust...draw a cross...symbol of death...part of our Lenten

Journey...goes all the way to the cross

And beyond...and beyond...earthly body of Jesus destroyed

Tomb was not filled with dust...decay had just barely started...spices to  
preserve the body...but you cannot put off death...destruction...dust to  
dust...his body would have eventually made its way into dust

But no...resurrection

Today...dust to dust...serious reckoning...we are just jars of clay  
Today...in these jars of clay...Spirit of God lives

The Apostle Paul offers a very intriguing image for those who are disciples of Jesus Christ, for those who follow Jesus Christ. Paul uses the image of a jar of clay and pretty much says, "That's us." He uses the image to illustrate that we are not impervious to cracking or breaking or getting crushed. I think it is fair to say a clay jar is a Lenten image. From dust we are and to dust we shall return. We get shaped up and formed and crafted into a clay vessel, but one day that clay vessel will dissolve and find its home once again among the dust of the earth.

Recognizing our own mortality is important. It humbles us. It can literally ground us, keeping us connected to the transient nature of life, perhaps slowing us down so we appreciate the fleeting moments of grace and mercy and joy and laughter we experience. What we find in II Corinthians is that while Paul is certainly hoping to make us aware of our mortality he has something more to say. While our human bodies are nothing more than jars of clay, these jars of clay we call our human bodies are vessels that hold a great treasure. We carry within us the presence of Jesus Christ. We carry within us the peace of Jesus Christ. We carry within us the power of Jesus Christ. Having this treasure which is God's greatest gift packed into us, jars of clay, it assures that we remember the all-surpassing power belongs to God. Paul also adds in the first verse of II Corinthians 5 that if this earthly tent we live in is destroyed...he is talking about our human body, the jar of clay...if this earthly tent we live in is destroyed we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, and when we inhabit that house, when get to our house in heaven, it will be so long and good bye to this earthly tent, to this jar of clay. A bright future, indeed a heavenly home awaits us who now spend our days traversing this earth in our jars of clay.

Right now, in this life, we live in the tension of possessing an incredible treasure, the love and hope and peace and presence of Jesus Christ, the most amazing treasure you could imagine, in vessels of clay. Paul is keenly aware of this tension in the second letter he wrote to the church in Corinth. He writes, “We are hard pressed on every side...perplexed...persecuted, struck down...” II Corinthians 4:8,9. In the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of the letter he recounts his particular struggles.... “I have...been in prison frequently, flogged severely, exposed to death, received forty lashes minus one...five times, beaten with rods three times, pelted with stones, shipwrecked three times...in danger from rivers, bandits his fellow Jews, Gentiles, in the city, in the country, at sea and in danger from false believers. He labored and toiled and went with sleep, knowing hunger and thirst, going without food and being cold and naked. And to top it off, he carries with him the pressure of being concerned daily for the church.” 11:23-28

It is in the same vein that we hear again the words from our passage this Ash Wednesday, where in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter the Apostle wrote of troubles, hardships, distresses, beatings, imprisonments, riots, hard work, sleepless night, hunger, being beaten, being sorrowful, and being poor.

And yet if we hear all this and think Paul is complaining, we have misunderstood the apostle. He is simply acknowledging that when you make your way through the world in a vessel that is a jar of clay, you get beat and banged up. That is the nature of human life. But that is not all there is to human life. For in this human life we who are clay jars, vessels of clay, have been filled with the treasure.

With Julie’s help I ordered a clay jar to carry with me during Lent. It arrived in the mail yesterday. When you see my clay jar you will realize it is not exactly a clay jar, but it is pretty close. What we ordered and what came in the mail is a piñata. More specifically, we ordered a purple piñata. Purple is the liturgical color for Lent. Wikipedia reminds us a piñata is a “container often made of **papier-mâché**, pottery, or

cloth; it is decorated, and filled with small toys or candy, or both, and then broken as part of a ceremony or celebration.” In other words, a piñata is a container that carries a treasure and is easily broken.

That is just about all I want to draw from the illustration of a piñata as we enter Lent. It is a container that carries a treasure. The container is easily broken. I don’t want to focus on how a piñata is broken, how a stick or baseball bat or broom handle is used to strike the piñata, and how as the piñata is struck it rips apart, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. I don’t want to focus on how there is great cheering with each blow that is landed. On our journey to Lent we will witness a body, a jar of clay that is subjected to blows and wounds and jeers and ridicule and humiliation. The body that suffers belongs to Jesus. In the end we can rejoice that his death brought great blessing. But to cheer his suffering is something we cannot do. It is something we will not do.

No, I don’t want to focus on how a piñata is broken. We live in a time of life when there is a great deal of bashing going on. I do not want to encourage that in the least. In fact, Lent is a time to repent of such bashing, the bashing of others for whatever reason it might be. Instead of bashing, Lent is a time to remember all human life is carried in jars of clay. We do well to respect all life, all people, all reputations, all those who think differently than us, all those who are not like us, and of course those who are closest to us, those nearest and dearest to us. Lent is an opportunity to turn from bashing. Lent is a time to respect others, to show reverence to others, for we realize how fragile we are as humans.

I don’t want to focus on how a piñata is broken. I am firmly against bashing and beating up on others. But I also do not want to ignore the treasure that is inside. One of the great testimonies Paul gives in II Corinthians is that all the suffering of life, all the sadness, all the pain, all the sorrow, all the challenges, all the obstacles, all the loss, all the grief, all the brokenness, can have at least one positive purpose. When we are broken, it opens us up so the treasure within spills out. I do

not like the beating and bashing that breaks a piñata, but when it is broken, some pretty wonderful stuff comes out.

Maybe our brokenness will be an opportunity for the treasure within us to spill out into the world around us.

- I'm thinking of a man who cared for his wife as she suffered with Alzheimer's. His long goodbye to her was a witness of faithful love, a love that endured until death did them part.
- I'm thinking of a woman whose adult daughter died, and how as God comforted her in her loss, she found herself with the chance to hold hands and pray with another mother going through exactly the same loss.
- I'm thinking of those who have been through cancer, who are cancer survivors, and who come alongside others when they are diagnosed to walk with them on their journey.
- I'm thinking of recovery groups, when someone who is making the journey of discovery reaches out to be a sponsor as yet another person admits they are helpless and seeks the strength of our higher power.
- I'm thinking of all those who experienced teasing and bullying as they grew up and who now teach or coach or work with young people or teach Sunday school or lead youth group in an effort to create safe spaces where kids can be valued and nurtured as they grow and mature.
- I'm thinking of you, followers of Jesus Christ who like Paul have come to realize your mortal body is nothing but a jar of clay. But you have come to realize there is a treasure inside you. It is not a treasure of your own doing or your own making. It is a gift of God. But it is inside you. And if we can admit and even embrace our brokenness, God will find beautiful ways for us to take the comfort we receive from God and share that comfort with others.

Certain stories stick with us because they speak a deep truth. Here is one of my favorite stories. Alyce McKenzie wrote a story that

appeared in *Guideposts* magazine in 1981 about a young mother who received word that her brother and his wife, her sister, and both the sister's children had been killed in a car wreck. She goes on to tell how she was numbed by the news and having difficulty accomplishing the necessary tasks to prepare for their flight back to Missouri to be with her family. At that point, a friend stopped by and simply said he was there to polish their shoes. In response to her surprised look he recounted how during a family tragedy it had taken him over an hour to polish all the family's shoes. Watching this friend sitting on the kitchen floor polishing all their shoes reminded her of someone else sitting on the floor washing people's feet, a simple act of presence and service. "Now, whenever I hear of an acquaintance who has lost a loved one...I try to think of one specific task that suits that person's need—such as washing the family car, taking the dogs to the boarding kennel, or housesitting during the funeral. And if the person says to me, 'How did you know I needed that done?' I reply 'It's because a man once cleaned my shoes.'"<sup>1</sup>

Paul talks a lot about suffering and sorrow and being broken in the second letter he wrote to the church in Corinth. He also writes this, "Praise be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of all compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any troubles, with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ." II Corinthians 1:3-5

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<sup>1</sup> Alyce McKenzie, *Preaching Biblical Wisdom in a Self-Help Society*, 138, 139.