I have my grandmother’s big pottery bowl, the one she used to make the most wonderful and hearty loaves of bread. She would place the dough into the greased bowl and place it on the rim of the tub in the bathroom, next to the cast iron heat register to rise. I loved that yeasty smell and was fascinated by the way the dough would expand, pushing the dampened kitchen towel upward as it rose. Grammy Spinning would let me help her knead the dough and put it in the oven. Those were precious times indeed.

When Grammy died I asked if I could have her Yelloware bowl. It’s nothing fancy, but it holds such treasured memories for me. Funny thing is, I used that bowl many times myself until one day I took it to an Antiques Roadshow style event we held at Grace Church a few years back. Well, come to find out, my grandmother’s old bread bowl was worth about $600. And for fear of damaging it, I have had it on a shelf ever since! After all it’s only made of clay, and clay is fragile.

In Paul’s day, clay jars were ordinary everyday utilitarian things. They were used for carrying water, for storing food, as trash containers, even as toilets; Plain and ordinary household vessels, breakable and easily replaced. Valuable items and expensive oils and were kept in more sturdy receptacles, often elaborately decorated with precious metals and stones or made of highly decorated ceramics. The container would be one worthy of the item stored within and often were just as expensive.

But today we hear Paul talking of treasures stored in earthenware, just simple utilitarian jars of clay. I can see Paul sitting by the light of a plain old pottery lamp, meditating on the *“Light that shines out of darkness”*, and of the words of Jesus to his followers, *“You are the light of the world”*….. just plain everyday folk, called to carry the Light of Christ to the ends of the earth.

I think it’s important for us to understand Paul’s context in writing to the church in Corinth. He has not been present there with the young congregation for quite awhile. He has been traveling on his mission and has even been in jail for a time, persecuted for his ardent preaching. In his absence, there are other preachers, other messages being delivered in the Corinthian community.

These “super apostles” as they became known, were talking against Paul’s preaching and urging people to follow their way, choose sides and declare, “I’m for Appollos”, or “I’m for Cephas” or “I’m for the Christ party”, or whoever is there and preaching that week, like it is a competition. So, in this letter Paul dictates to the church, he is making his case for the gospel and is looking for their support of his mission.

But instead of centering the argument on himself by defending his preaching style or defending himself personally against the criticism, Paul seeks to differentiate this message from the others’ by pointing out what a vessel of clay **he is**. And he does this without shame or apology. *“We do not proclaim ourselves, we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake.”* Don’t look at me, Paul says, look to Jesus. If you are seeing the Light, it is because it is God’s will that it shines from the face of Christ who shines in you. I love what Dorothy Day had to say about sainthood. She said *“Don’t call me a saint, I don’t want to be dismissed that easily.”* Paul is saying, I’m no saint; it’s not about me, it’s not about you, it’s about God.

Paul does not want this to be about himself; he knows that will get him nowhere fast. This is the upside-down nature of God’s Kin-dom, and we have heard it over and over from Jesus….“blessed are the poor”, “the first will be last and last will be first,” “I have not come to be served, I have come to serve”. In weakness there is strength, a strength that comes only from the treasure in that fragile, chipped jar – the Light of Christ – the extraordinary power that belongs to God and does not come from us.

What a very foreign message to those Corinthians, living in their cosmopolitan port city. It was a place that had fallen on hard times and had come back to life in a big bold way, attracting all kinds of commerce – legal and illegal. The push to be successful was fierce, self-reliance was the rule…. toot your own horn…… get your piece of the pie.

Paul wants to make it clear that when he preaches the gospel, the power to do that does not come from him, but from the extraordinary power of God. Earthen vessels have little reason to boast. Paul claims his authority by denying it and taking on a visage of humility and self-deprecation. Preaching a different way of living, a way of self-emptying and dependence on God, would be a difficult message to get across in Paul’s time, and you and I are not likely to hear a message like that many places in our contemporary society.

I’m not sure where we ever got the idea in the church that we were supposed to come on Sundays already perfected…..where we thought we were to have everything figured out on our own……..where we adopted the notion that we needed to keep our sorrows and pain private….that our jars of clay shouldn’t show our cracks and chips. But I think we see it all the time. I’ve been guilty of it myself. After the death of my brother many years ago, I took to answering people who asked how I was with, “I’m OK”, even when I knew I wasn’t. I just didn’t want them to think that even after several months, I was still in pain. I thought they would be tired of hearing me.

Where else but here should we come in the midst of our losses and our joys? It is destructive to the our human spirit and our community to feel we need to be something other than the very human beings we are, living this very human life given by our loving God. We are by definition imperfect, but the treasure we carry, the spark of the extraordinariness of our Creator, is the power of Life, given to us in the crucified and risen Christ.

Is living the life of a clay jar a life of ease? Often it is not. The challenges Paul faced in his ministry are evidence to us, “afflicted in every way, **but not** crushed; perplexed, **but not** driven to despair; persecuted, **but not** forsaken; struck down, **but not** destroyed.”

It is the in the earthenware pot that our strength is found. Its contents are the “**but nots**” in our struggles: generosity, forgiveness, sacrifice, humility, hospitality and justice, and that is our sustenance. With these gifts, through these graces, we are released from the burden of perfection, able to be who the Master Potter, created us.

Oscar Wilde once said, “The only difference between a saint and a sinner is every saint has a past and every sinner has a future.” There is a big difference from being cracked and chipped and being of no use. Often, fulfillment and purpose is not about our trying harder or even praying harder. It’s about emptying ourselves over and over so that we may be filled time and time again for God’s purposes. And if we are a bit cracked, then perhaps it is so that we might leak out some of the contents of that humble vessel for others to benefit from the blessings of those gifts. Besides, a few chips will give us some character, don’t you think?

Amen.