

Sunday Sermon
June 3, 2018
II Corinthians 4:1-7
“Common Clay Jars”

Introduction

Today is the first Sunday of what is called Ordinary Time on the church calendar, the longest season of the church year. It is appropriate that on this Sunday we ordain and install church leaders and remind ourselves that though we are all ordinary, that is who God uses for the kingdom.

The Reverend Daniel Aleshire tells a story about his mother and stepfather and the church they attended. The church met in a white frame building with roots in the 19th century. Decades before Daniel’s mother and stepfather arrived, a leak developed in the bell tower. At the time, it was determined in the dwindling congregation that the best way to address the leak was to close in all the open areas around the bell, so that the water could not come in and leak down by the front doors to the sanctuary. So they boarded up the bell tower, and it became simply a steeple.

When Alshire’s mother and stepfather became members of the church, his stepfather, Adrian, was surprised to learn that the church used to have a bell, and Adrian wondered if it still did. So as a newly-elected officer at the age of 73, he climbed up into the steeple to explore the situation. And he began to work. He tore away the rotting plywood sheets that had boarded up the tower openings. He filled six garbage bags of bird droppings and lowered them down.

He found that while the 1960s plywood had rotted away, the nineteenth century timber frame was still solid and probably good for another century. He located the problems that had caused the leaks. He replaced the rotted floorboards and waterproofed the area.

Then he began working on the bell that was covered with years of droppings and corrosion. He scrapped and he washed, and he scrapped and he washed. Then he repaired the hinge mechanism, and he oiled it. He got a rope, tied it to the swing arm, and dropped it down by the front door that led into the sanctuary. Then came Sunday morning.

For the first time in decades, the rope hung down. And he said to the children, “Come, take turns ringing the bell.” So they lined up after Sunday school and rang the bell that worship was about to begin. From then on, the children gathered every week to ring the bell to call people to worship.

Alshire says that his stepfather Adrian was not particularly well-educated or wealthy. But he was a man who was significant in the life of his church. Significant—not because he was special and did something that nobody else could. Significant because he did something that nobody else would. Adrian knew the meaning of servanthood.

I

Most of the good things that happen in the world are done not by people who have special gifts or special abilities but by people who are willing to do them.

This morning we are going to ordain and install some elders and deacons. We are not ordaining and installing these individuals to honor or to privilege, rather to responsibility. They are being installed to be the servants of the church, that is, the body of Christ in the world.

The church is the only organization I know where those elected to office are servants. If you serve on the board of most organizations, you decide what other people should do. But in the church, if you are elected an elder or deacon, everybody else is going to tell you what they think you should do.

There was a woman in one of my husband's churches who kept campaigning to be elected an elder. She felt that God had called her to that office. But about three months after she began serving, she came to Bill and said, "There are lots of things that elders do around here that they should not have to do."

Bill said, "Really?"

"Yes, she said, "I don't think that elders should have to worry about all these maintenance things, like lockup and repairs, much less worry about if there is enough money."

"Perhaps," Bill said, "or perhaps you don't really want to be a servant of the church." In the church, being an officer means being a servant of the people but, more importantly, a servant of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

II

And it is only through the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit that individuals called are able to do the tasks set before them. That is what the Apostle Paul explains to the Christians at Corinth.

You see, First Church Corinth was experiencing a crisis of confidence in leadership. So Paul uses an analogy to tell them that God does not use extraordinary people to build the church. God uses common, frail, ordinary individuals. "We have this treasure in clay jars," he says, "so that it be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us."

So when I ordain or install individuals, I like to get the cheapest clay jars I can find to give them. To remind them that God uses common, ordinary, flawed individuals to build the church and that any power or authority belongs to God and does not come from them.

I ordered these jars from Mexico, cheapest ones they offered. They are frail and flawed. In fact, I will be surprised if they make it home with the recipients without breaking. They are limited in how they can be used. Officers, they came with a warning not to use them for food or drink.

When the jars arrived, four of them came out of the box as that pile of broken

pottery pieces on the communion table. I filed a report of broken, damaged goods with the company. The company emailed back, “We would happily process a full refund, but please send us a photo of the broken items for our claim to process.”

For a moment, I thought about sending a picture of the officers we are installing today. I remembered how at our Officer Training Retreat, when we shared faith journeys, we shared about the parts of our lives that are or have been broken or damaged. And how at times we feel frail and limited.

But I also remembered how in Paul’s day they did not have safes or safety deposit boxes to lock up valuables. So it was customary to store something of great value in old clay jars, so that the container of the treasure would not attract attention to itself.

Officers, you are frail. You have scratches, chips, scars. You are limited in what you can do. You cannot serve all purposes, and you certainly cannot keep everybody happy. But you hold the treasure of the extraordinary power of God. And if you put yourselves in God’s hands, God will mold you into useful vessels and bring from you mighty and marvelous works for the kingdom.

Charge

So with the jars comes a charge, not just to the recipients but to each of us. If we start thinking of ourselves as special, we fail. But if we think of ourselves as vessels used by God for God’s work in this place and beyond, then we have found our place as servants. But for that to happen, we have to allow God to patch up our brokenness, put pieces back together and reform us and use us.

Most of the good things in God’s world are done not by people who have special gifts or special abilities but by common, everyday people who are willing to answer the call to serve.

My prayer for each of you in this part of the body of Christ is that you will find a love and a servanthood for it like Daniel’s stepfather Adrian. And that you will cherish this place, not the buildings, but the people, the ministries, and the missions, and what God is calling you next.

That is the challenge on this First Sunday in Ordinary Time for each and every one of us common clay jars called by God. Amen.

Almighty God,

We thank you that you have called these ones to lead this congregation. And we ask that you would teach them how to lead, how to serve, so that they might help everyone here by your church in this place. May it be so. In the name of Jesus Christ we ask this. Amen.

Time of Prayer

O God, we are but clay in your hands. You have placed a treasure deep inside

each of us. At times, we confess, we become blinded to our own treasure and worth. We become blinded to the strengths and gifts of others. We become afflicted with many burdens.

We remember now those whose names we have lifted who bear the burden of grief, the trials of illness, or other challenges of this life.

We ask that your light would shine through their times of darkness, that your spirit would work to heal and to move toward new life and new beginnings.

We ask you to hear our words now as we pray the prayer our Savior taught us, the Lord's Prayer, saying . . .

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.