



Jesus first. Everything else after Jesus.

Second Sunday after Pentecost
2 June 2024

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Chris

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

On the day of my confirmation, the pastors laid their hands on my head and read these verses from 2 Corinthians. “For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake. For it is the God who said, “Light will shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” When we were asked to choose our Confirmation verses, I spent time reading all the usual good choices.

- Psalm 23: The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
- Psalm 51:10 “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.”
- Psalm 139: I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful all your works, that I know very well.
- Isaiah 43:1 “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”
- Matthew 5:16 “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”
- Ephesians 2 “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.

Somewhere in my searching, the words of 2 Corinthians, chapter 4 jumped out at me. Long before I knew I was being called into the ministry. Long before I would give up the idea of fame and glory at the wise old age of 13, these words caught my attention. “For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord.” Those have been words to live by. Jesus first. Everything else after Jesus. Yes, I am happy to stand in front of a microphone and entertain for a moment or two. Yes, I can preach a sermon much longer than is needed. Just ask Pastor Tony. “Less is more, less is more.” He would say. But in my ministry as pastor, I believe I have always pointed to Jesus over standing in the spotlight myself. Mentors along the way: pastors who have shaped my whole life, have provided that example. My parents have taught me that truth along the way. My colleagues here at Ascension, offer that same example. Jesus first. Everything else after Jesus.

It would be a long time after my confirmation, before I read the verses that followed verses 5 and 6. “But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, ⁹ persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed, ¹⁰ always carrying around in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.” I think I needed some years of living before I would be ready to understand, let alone appreciate, the value of “this treasure in clay jars.” What does Paul write to the church in Corinth? “But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” Jesus first. Everything else after Jesus.

It is no small moment, to recognize this treasure in clay jars. Though it seems like we have a more difficult time learning to appreciate the treasure until we come face-to-face with the fragility of the clay jars. Paul writes - we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed. Have you been there? Perplexed, but not driven to despair. Know that feeling, do you? Persecuted but not forsaken. There have been days. Stuck down but not destroyed. Yes, well, sometimes the strikes feel like they never stop. If we are lucky enough to know the innocence of children as long as we possibly can, then the realities of life can be set aside until we are older, wiser, more prepared – if we are ever fully prepared? These clay jars are not as strong as one would hope. What does the prophet Isaiah say to us? We are the clay, you are the potter. We are all the work of your hand. I love the imagery of God shaping us into God wants us to be. I just wish God would use stronger clay. The Apostle knows this too. We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. Jesus first. Everything else after Jesus.



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Today, we celebrate the extraordinary power that is the talent of Vicki's hands and heart and well feet – all fourteen of them at the organ and beyond. Yet, we know this powerful talent comes not from Vicki but from God...just ask her how she remembers what her hands and feet do separately at different times. That power can only come from God. We celebrate the extraordinary power that is the gift of transition – the growing up of young people into young adults. Students who close one chapter of life to begin another. Clay pots that sometimes could not contain all the information taught to them – Spanish in and Spanish out. Calculus in and calculus out. AP Literature in and AP Literature out. It seems somewhere in this senior year - the clay pot springs a leak of senioritis and then nothing stays in. Oh, how fragile these clay pots can be even as God shaped them from the beginning.

There are also clay pots among us who have known the strength of the clay that has held them together. The extraordinary power of God that holds strong even when we thought the clay pot would crack or shatter. Afflicted in every way but not crushed. That is God's promise. Broken but not destroyed. That is God's promise. Perplexed but not driven to despair. That is God's promise. Persecuted but not forsaken. That is God's promise – that we are never left alone. Even as there are days it feels as if we are entirely on our own. Someone here today is rebuilding the life they thought shattered beyond repair. Broken but not destroyed. Remember? Someone here today prepares for surgery, praying that the potter would remind them that the clay is strong in the potter's talented hands. What does the psalmist say, "I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works, that I know very well. Even so, we worry about the work of God's hands. Afflicted but not crushed. Remember? Someone here today is trying to figure out what is next in their life. Perplexed but not driven to despair. Remember?"

And then there is Jesus. "Again, he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand." ² The religious leaders were watching Jesus to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³ And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." ⁴ Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. ⁵ He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored." Persecuted but not forsaken. Remember? It is no small moment to recognize the treasure. It turns out, we often forget the treasure of who we are created to be. It also is true that we need Jesus to remind us of the treasure that we are. It is when we put Jesus first in our lives that these clay jars give glory to God as the potter intended. The treasure inside – the extraordinary power of God was never ours. It has always been God's power to use as God sees fit.

Our Japanese sisters and brothers know well the promise of the potter in the clay and the treasure within. In Japanese culture, there is the art of repairing broken objects, often pottery, with gold lacquer. The gold lacquer is used to piece pottery shards together again, creating a more beautiful object through the acts of breaking and repair. For me, the gold that shines, almost as if it is leaking through the pottery, is the treasure of God pouring out of us and into the world. It seems, dear friends, that there are times in our lives when our affliction, our brokenness, our confusion, our persecution gives way to the glory of God as the extraordinary power of God shines through our dull clay potted selves. Only then, are we able to truly see the treasure of who God has created us to be. Thanks be to God. Amen.