



## THAT'S HOW THE LIGHT GETS IN

June 3, 2018, Second Sunday after Pentecost

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

Kimberly L. Clayton, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

---

As you can tell, if you try to walk in just about any direction in the church right now, you can't get there from here. The summer-long construction project has begun and we are going to look worse before we look better. We hope you will be patient and persevere in coming to worship. Yes, you heard that right...I'm inviting you to attend services this summer whenever you are in town. We are implementing part of what you worked very hard to achieve in last year's Capital Campaign. Through your generosity, we are improving the parish house entrance and garden area. But this past week has me wondering if we set our sights too low.

News broke mid-week that a Louisiana televangelist has launched a \$54 million dollar campaign to buy the fourth private jet his ministry so desperately needs. He put forth his best pitch: For one thing, he said with a chuckle, "If Jesus was physically on the earth today, he wouldn't be riding on a donkey." I'm thinking that is true because Jesus, like most New Yorkers, seemed to walk everywhere he went. As far as I remember, he rode a donkey only once for a special occasion and even then it was to make a particular point, but I digress. This televangelist had another reason his congregation should support the private jet Campaign... You see, the Lord spoke to him directly and told him he wanted him to have a brand new Dassault Falcon 7X. The Lord specified the brand and everything, saying it would get him closer to the Lord—literally and figuratively—flying through the heavens, conversing with God, and carrying the gospel message to the ends of the earth.



Back in Corinth, Paul was facing a similar situation. In that bustling port city of the Roman Empire, entrepreneurs had the rare opportunity to improve their station in life. There was room to compete in Corinth for one's share of wealth and social standing and political favor.<sup>1</sup> This kind of competitive behavior even crept into the fledgling house churches. Though they were Jesus followers, cultural conditions influenced discipleship then as it does still today. A kind of triumphalism developed among some members. When they did well in life, it was surely a sign of God's favor, and this included their spiritual lives as well as their economic fortunes. These believers felt spiritually superior to others in the church. Those with the gift of eloquence, including speaking in tongues, those who had wealth, who performed great works lorded it over others. Factions developed. Conflict crept into the community.

Some mighty impressive preachers came to town offering a very different message than Paul had preached. These slick apostles were persuasive enough that when the Corinthians thought back on Paul, who by this time was off on a mission in another city, well, he suffered by comparison. They decided Paul wasn't particularly elegant or eloquent. And those afflictions and hardships he endured? Well, it just made you wonder about his true spiritual stature.

Word of the simmering conflicts reached Paul and he wrote this letter to the Corinthians...one of several letters he had to write to straighten out their theology and church life and to repair his relationship with them, too. Our passage today is Paul's attempt to correct them without sounding too personally defensive.

Paul speaks of *his* ministry, but he is also describing *their* ministry, the ministry all of us share—that with our lives, our words and our actions every day, we are proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord. One of Christianity's earliest and most basic confessions of faith: 'Jesus Christ is Lord,' is the confession we Jesus followers make—and it shapes, or should shape, everything we say and do. Next, Paul reaches all the way back to Genesis 1 to claim that the same God who said, "Let there be light" at the beginning of creation shines as light now in our hearts. What

\* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



shines in us is the light and knowledge of God's glory that we ourselves have seen in the face of Christ.

This is the treasure, Paul declares, that God has given us: the light and knowledge of God's glory. Now, people in Corinth in 50 A.D. and people like us in 2018 can get very confused about treasure...we go chasing after economic wealth or social standing or political advantage or physical beauty and perfection...But Paul says we are looking in all the wrong places. The only treasure that lasts and is worth it is found in the face of Christ. It is the glory of God. All the shiny objects out there that seem so important and promise so much are false treasures. They will not last, or we will not outlast them. But ah, the glory of God...that is light for us in every darkness and it will never go out. Ah, God's glory...It is knowledge that never fails us, even when, especially when, our own knowledge comes to an end. This treasure, the very glory of God, shines in us and through us to others.

If some of those spiritually triumphalist Corinthians don't think Paul is all that impressive, well, he is the first to agree. He is no more than a clay jar but then, neither are the rest of us. We are, all of us, clay jars: ordinary, useful, and also fragile.

Poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen wrote a song called "Anthem." It has a refrain that could be Paul's anthem, too:

*Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There's a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in.*

"Forget your perfect offering." Paul would agree. We will never make a perfect offering anyway. We are too clay jar-ish to pull that off. There's a crack in everything about us. "That's how the light gets in," Leonard Cohen sang in his own gravelly, dark, and imperfect way. And it is, I think Paul would add, also how the light shines out through us to others. We are not perfect; God is. We are fragile



humans, yet God's glory, stronger than death, shines in us nevertheless. Let's face it, the way you and I practice Jesus' ministry, well, there's a crack in everything we do or say, but somehow the light and knowledge of God can be made known to others in spite of ourselves because the treasure belongs to God.

One of the members of Central Presbyterian Church when I was a pastor there was Ed Mouthrop. Ed was a wood-turner who made beautiful bowls. His sons have followed in his footsteps. Ed's bowls are in private collections, and museums, and in the White House, too. One day when I visited Ed and Mae at their home, he showed me his workshop and all the piles of wood he kept nearby that had not yet become a beautiful bowl. Ed told me something that day about the wood that I have never forgotten...because it seemed so deeply theological to me. He said that what actually makes the bowls so beautiful, what gives them their unique design and striation in the turning, is the disease or damage the wood has suffered. That sounds a bit like Paul speaking to the Corinthians. It is not being superior to others that shows God's glory in the face of Christ. It is in clay jars, in diseased wood...that light shines through...beauty emerges. The glory of God is visible even in our imperfections and our weaknesses. Somehow the resurrection life of Jesus is visible even in our mortal bodies. In fact, it is our vulnerability that makes it clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

It is only by the power of God, not our own, that we can be afflicted and not be crushed; that we can be perplexed, confused, at a loss...and not be at a total loss or driven to despair; be persecuted, yet know we are not forsaken; even be struck down and yet ultimately we are not destroyed. Because it is God's glory, there is no cause for anyone to feel spiritually superior to another. And we must not confuse glory as the world counts glory with the glory of God seen in the face of Jesus. We should not spend our best efforts on shiny objects that can be bought or earned, but instead apply ourselves to the light of the knowledge of God, which is a treasure unequalled and given freely like grace.

The Jet Campaign has produced a promotional video. In it, the televangelist states that this new plane "is going to touch people...it's going to change lives one soul



at a time.” Then he shows his followers a photo of himself standing beside his ministry’s other three jets. Under the portrait is a quote that he proudly reiterates, “It’s not about possessions, it’s about priorities.”

I think that’s what Paul was trying to say to the Corinthians, too. Though his theology and practice of the faith took him in a very different direction. It’s not about possessions, Paul said. Or your position above others. It’s about priorities. The priority of God’s glory. Glory that looks like the face of Christ. Glory that chooses to shine through clay jars, though we are less than a perfect offering. Clay jars, where there is a crack in everything. But then again, that’s how the light gets in...and how it spills out, too.

*Amen.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth&Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2009), 6-7.