

2 Corinthians 4:1-15

The ministry of a particular church does not belong to the members of that church; it does not belong to the people who gather for worship in that particular community of faith; nor does it belong to its pastors. The church is not a building; it's not an institution. The church is a people. You might recall the Avery and Marsh Sunday School or Vacation Bible School Song from the 1970s: "I am the church! You are the church! We are the church together! ...The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is a people!" How very true.

The church is a people. But it doesn't end there. The church is a people who belong to God, people, who have been loved, forgiven, blessed, called, claimed, and sent by God. Paul knew first-hand what it means to be in Christ, to bear the name of Christ, to be a follower of Christ. This means, in part, that we do not belong to ourselves. In Romans, Paul writes that "For whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." We do not belong to ourselves. Our lives are not our own.

The church is a people who belong to God, which means that the church as community, as an institution, does not belong to the people. It's not the possession of the gathered community. It belongs to God. God called the church into being. God still calls it into being - forms it - shapes it - supports it - cherishes it - loves it - forgives it - puts up with it - and sends it on a mission to be an agent of grace, a vessel of grace poured out upon the world.

Ministry, the work of the church, is about service: serving the ongoing mission of God in the world, extending the work of Jesus Christ to more and more people. We are called to embody God's mercy and grace in a world that's desperate to hear good news. And ministry is about grace. As Paul puts so beautifully, "as God's grace brings more and more people to Christ, there will be great thanksgiving, and God will receive more and more glory." That's the goal, that's the mission, that's our calling.

God is involved in all of this, but don't expect it to be easy. It's not. It's difficult, very difficult. It might actually look and feel like crucifixion at times. It's not always going to feel good. What we're up against "out there" in the world is formidable. What we're up against

“in here,” within ourselves, is formidable. That’s why we need to remember that it’s not about us, it’s not about what we can achieve or accomplish or will into existence. It’s only by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this work. Therefore, we must not lose heart or become discouraged or fall into despair.

If we think it’s about us it’s easy to get caught up in our own personal agendas for the church, what we want for the church, what makes us happy, what serves our needs, what reinforces our worldview or ideology or values. But it’s not about you and me. Thank God for that.

However, don’t be mistaken, God needs us. We’re partners in this ministry. We’re all in this together. We have been claimed and called - every one of us - by virtue of our baptisms. We exist because we have a calling, a purpose to fulfill for the sake of the ever-unfolding drama of God’s grace. We exist - right now - in order for the light of the gospel to shine, brightly, more brightly, through our dark lives. As Paul said, “For it is the God who said, ‘Let there be light in the darkness,’ that makes us understand that this light is the brightness of the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ.”

That light shines within us. That light, the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, shines, is trying to shine, within us, through us, in order to bring light to the dark places of the world. This extraordinary, priceless treasure dwells within our hearts. It’s there; we need to believe it’s there, within us, fragile though we may be, nevertheless, it’s there. Remarkably, God has entrusted us with this treasure, in us, in the weakness of our bodies. We are the jars of clay that Paul talks about - we’re earthen vessels.

It was the practice of Eastern kings, the Orientals, to keep valuables and money, gold and silver, in jars of earthenware which might be hid, and in case of danger, might be buried underground. A mere earthen jar might contain an enormous treasure. Alluding to this, Paul pointed to his own body, hard pressed by labours and afflictions. He says that despite these frail bodies of ours, with their limited faculties and powers, in these "earthen vessels" God has placed this great treasure in us, entrusted it to us, God’s clay jars, so easy to crack. Yet, in love, God risks the treasure by giving it to us, placing it within us. And, so, we have the privilege of being the stewards of God’s gifts.

According to Paul, “everyone can see that our glorious power is from God and is not our own.” Power – *dunamis*, in Greek, as in “dynamite” and “dynamic,” has the same root. What is placed within us, this treasure, has power, extraordinary power. And when it’s used, it’s empowering. This, too, is a remarkable claim. Just think about this. By virtue of God’s grace, both individually and together, we have more power available to us than we think we do. God’s power is available to us.

If this sounds scary to consider - it is! It might be easier, safer, and simpler to think that we’re not all that powerful, then we don’t have to take responsibility for it. But that’s not what Scripture tells us. God places this power in us in order for us to use it. We are the conduits, we are called to let it pour through us and when this happens we discover what the power of God’s grace is trying to do with our lives, through our lives, for our lives, and the lives of God’s people throughout the world.

And when we realize this, claim this, remember this, then God can really do something with us. When we get out of the way, set our egos to the side, we remember that it’s not about us. God can really begin to work in us and through us, as individuals and as a community. Then the church is really acting like a church. Then we discover who we really are and what we’re capable of achieving, what we’re capable of accomplishing, even the hardships we’re able to face and endure, all because we know there’s a deeper power at work within us, working for us and our salvation, a power that is on our side - with us and for us, continually claiming us and calling us and sending us to extend grace to more and more people, so that thanksgiving and praise might increase to the glory of God. This is why it’s an extraordinary privilege to be engaged in the work of the church. There’s no place like it. There’s nothing like it.

This is what it means to be a people reformed and always reforming according to the power of grace within us. Grace is more than a theological idea or concept, it’s the power of God and this power is real and redemptive. It’s this power at work within us and through us in the church which God continues to use for the reformation of God’s people - for the reformation of the world.

A very young, budding theologian asked her mother, “Mommy, what is the church for?”

This is what a church is for: the ongoing reformation of God's people and the world. And it's this power at work in us that allows a church to be dynamic, like the Spirit's power; never static. It's why any church exists.

It's why this church exists. You can see it reflected in the annual reports. Look around and witness it here in worship. See it in mission and fellowship and see it in the wider church in education and advocacy. To be baptized means we have been incorporated into God's plan for creation, it means that all of us, together, have been empowered to be agents of grace, you and me, individually and together. It's not an option. You can't opt out of this. It comes with the territory. It's what comes after we say, "I believe...."

God isn't finished with us. There's plenty of work for us to do. We're still being loved and forgiven and claimed and called and sent to love and forgive and claim and call and send, extending grace, shining our light in the dark places of the world. We, clay pots may be cracked, but it's the cracks that let God's light shine through us that are the most beautiful part about us! The following story illustrates how even cracked pots can have a great purpose.

"A water bearer in India had two large pots, each hung on each end of a pole which he carried across his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, and while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream to the master's house, the cracked pot arrived only half full.

For a full two years this went on daily, with the bearer delivering only one and a half pots full of water to his master's house. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, perfect to the end for which it was made. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do.

After two years of what it perceived to be a bitter failure, as the water bearer was filling the pots by the stream, the cracked pot spoke. "I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you. "Why?" asked the bearer. "What are you ashamed of?" "For the past two years I have been able deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes

water to leak out all the way back to your master's house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work, and you don't get full value from your efforts," the pot said.

The water bearer felt sorry for the old cracked pot, and in his compassion he said, "As we return to the master's house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path." As they went up the hill, the old cracked pot took notice of the sun warming the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path, and this cheered it somewhat. But at the end of the trail, it still felt bad because it had leaked out half its load, and so again it apologized to the bearer for its failure.

The bearer said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you've watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table. Without you being just the way you are, he would not have this beauty to grace his house."

Moral: Each of us has our own unique flaws. We're all cracked pots - not crackpots. In this world, nothing goes to waste. You may think like the cracked pot that you're inefficient or useless, that you're not enough in certain areas of your life, but somehow these flaws can turn out to be a blessing in disguise."

Paul acknowledges his own deep flaws and failing which members of his congregation also share. Yet, God still works in his life as he works in the lives all those in the congregation. God chooses to work in and through people, to bring them to faith, to bring them to service, despite their flaws and failings. Just like the clay jars, we have cracks, chips, and scratches. If a clay jar is dropped on the floor, it shatters. Like Paul, we need to express our gratitude to God who chooses flawed humans to be part of this work we have been assigned, to do this ministry, to be part of the church, to be in this ministry together. Amen.