

**Clay Pots**  
Memorial Sunday, May 30, 2021  
2 Corinthians 4: 5-12  
Maple Grove UMC  
Rev. Patricia Wagner

For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. <sup>6</sup> For it is the God who said, "Let light 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 Jesus Christ.

<sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup> always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. <sup>11</sup> For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. <sup>12</sup> So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Memorial Days begin in the Civil War, and one of the first happened in South Carolina in 1865. There, 257 Union soldiers had died in a prisoner of war camp and were buried in unmarked graves in Charleston; the South's main port for the collection and selling of human beings.

Freedmen and women prepared a memorial graveyard and then reburied those union soldiers. And thousands more marched to the site to bless and remember those who died in the cause to end their enslavement.

There is such poignancy to this story; These men from the north, conscripted into this great, but costly cause, and their memorializers themselves having come through unspeakable agony and loss, meet on this now holy ground.

The holiday that came from such gatherings is the one that is dedicated to remembering: remembering the forgotten, and the costs of war and conflict.

Our scriptures today remind us that we also called to remember Psalm 139 asks us to remember that God remembers us, and Paul, that ordinary human beings even, or perhaps, particularly in our weakness are vessels of the divine.

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Many years ago, I was traveling on the highway, and I saw a slow moving vehicle in the right hand lane. It was an armored tank, and standing on the back were two soldiers, in full battle gear holding their weapons. I passed another, then another, then another, 7 of them in total, young men, black and white in the slenderness of youth.

This was before such equipment became part of our civilian forces. We almost never saw battle-ready soldiers, during this war in Afghanistan, that will soon end for us and continue without us.

But, even armed as they were it was their vulnerability, I sensed, their humanity beneath the Kevlar jackets.

By the time I was passing the last tank I realized I hadn't even acknowledged them, these young men who might not return.

So I waved, and, to my surprise, the soldier on the last tank saw my wave through the window, and he waved back as if he'd been looking for someone to acknowledge him.

I suddenly feared for him as a fellow human being for whom Psalm 139 says, so clearly, God loves, attends to, hopes for, and will be with unto death.

It started to rain, hard and I turned on my wipers, and thought about those soldiers caught in the rain, taking it, because that's what they do:

That's what soldiers, sailors, marines, airmen and women, and Coast Guardsmen and women, do. They take it. They bear the battle, they take in the suffering into their minds and bodies just as those who were

enslaved did. As they endured cruelty, and fought for freedom, and as their descendants have ever since.

Just as health care workers who have spent the past year on the frontlines of COVID, thousands of whom who have died.

All these human beings wearing various forms of protective armor. Physical, emotional, and yet each of them, all of us, vulnerable to life's demands so aware of our human inadequacies and pondering our belovedness, the meaning of our little lives and our deaths.

Paul, the apostle, felt inadequate, even though he'd been saved from a wasted, soul-killing life by a revelation from the crucified and risen Lord.

There were others, who seemed to garner more attention and devotion. Paul was always aware that his appearance was not pleasing. He had come through many trials for his testimony and now he finds himself diminished in comparison to others.

His arrogance, his armor falls away in his writing, and you see how vulnerable he feels to rejection, just as we are.

But in that diminishment, he realized something.

*I am not impressive, he says, But the thing is, its not about me.* In fact, he says, it is my weakness, my mistakes, my unimpressive self, that allows everyone to know that whatever I accomplish is not from my own power. Whatever light I shed is not from my own self.

*We are clay, he says, clay pots.* The people of Corinth know what he means. They are everyday items, common, breakable, made from the earth. He goes on. *We are clay pots that can be filled with the treasure that is the light of the knowledge of the glory of God.*

And because we hold this treasure in these clay pots it is evident that this power, this light is not from us.

How else could it be that we are *afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed?*

It's not about us. We believers carry the death of Christ in us, he says. We carry that infinitely vulnerable, compassionate, sacrificing love of Christ in us. Which means, giving up our lives for Jesus' sake in whatever way that happens, large or small, so that the life of Jesus might be visible in our very mortal, imperfect selves.

I think we can take such comfort in knowing that our lives, however short or long, however quiet or renowned, can be a remembrance of Jesus' own life.

Rose and I went to the Veterans Memorial yesterday. It is worth your time, particularly the exhibit about PTSD and suicide. We ended by going to the replica of the Vietnam Memorial.

There were people there, in yellow jackets. "May I help you," he asked, ready to lead us to a name to help us remember.

Remembering there has been so much loss this year, even this week, and it is worth remembering that every life, even ones that seem lost from the beginning or lost forever, are never lost to God.

And that we, the living, can do what seems impossible. We can be filled with mercy and courage, compassion and wisdom and sacrificial love

Because these lives we have, these clay pots, formed of the earth, vulnerable, breakable, and prone to mistakes, are vessels of God's everlasting light.

Let us remember that and be thankful. Amen.