

It just didn't make sense to the Corinthians. How could Paul, of all people, understand, interpret, and proclaim the extraordinary power and deeds of God? Paul was certainly faithful . . . but he wasn't flashy. His words were prolific . . . but his life was not prosperous. He was intellectually astute . . . but not attractive.

The Corinthians were well acquainted with Paul. He had founded their church years before and visited them afterwards, and still advised them from afar.

But in the eyes of the Corinthians, Paul was hardly anything to behold. He was ugly, possibly disfigured from a wound on his face. Paul's public speaking was unimpressive and his life was . . . difficult and poor. In his work proclaiming Christ crucified and risen, Paul had gotten himself into all kinds of trouble. His life is full of suffering: crushing prison sentences, physical afflictions, emotional despair, public persecution.

Among the Corinthians, Paul's lot in life had started to hurt his reputation and the reliability of his teaching about Christ. Especially now that other preachers had come to town—Paul calls them “super-apostles”—and these super-apostles were the opposite of Paul.

They are great preachers. They had flashy rhetoric, they were good-looking, and, to top it all off, they were personally prosperous and led well-to-do lives.

The Corinthians loved them. For who doesn't like to listen to eloquent, handsome, wealthy people? Furthermore, they proclaimed a different version of the gospel, a gospel that was easier to follow than the cross, a gospel that was centered less on Christ and more on themselves.

That's the first fallacy that Paul has to correct in our reading today. Unlike the false super-apostles, "we do not proclaim ourselves," Paul writes, "we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord." We, Paul says of himself and his companions, are your servants, not your superiors, working on behalf of God.

Because it is God—not us—who said, "Let light shine out of darkness." And it is God—not us—who makes the light of the knowledge of Christ shine in our hearts.

Now here's where Paul delivers the rhetorical punch against the self-glorifying gospel teachers. We have this light, this power, this knowledge of the glory of God in Christ, this *treasure* as Paul calls it, in clay jars.

In his metaphor, the treasure is all the good stuff of Christ's resurrection. The treasure is the Gospel message: Christ's manifest message of forgiveness of sins and release to the captives and good news to the poor and poor in spirit.

Paul acknowledges that what's strange about this treasure—especially for these status-loving Corinthians—is that it comes in clay jars.

We have this treasure in clay jars, he writes. Christ's message of love and hope and freedom isn't packaged up in a fancy gift-wrapped box or put in a precious piece of pottery or even placed in a pretty container. No, —to put Paul's metaphor in modern terms—we have the treasure of the Gospel of Christ in Tupperware or in a Ziploc bag.

We have this treasure in clay jars That is to say, the extraordinary message of Christ's love comes to us through ordinary means, unglamorous speakers, and humble, frail human beings.

The good news of God's eternal love comes through ordinary, unglamorous, humble people like Paul. Through ordinary, unglamorous, humble people like you and me.

We are ordinary and unglamorous. We have wounds and scars. We are people with tempers, with flaws, with addictions, and shortcomings. We are imperfect and inexperienced. Maybe even a little cracked or worn out.

But we have this treasure in clay jars. God loves and uses people like Paul. God loves and uses people like us.

Through sinners like us, God sends a message of forgiveness of sins.

Through hard-hearted people like us, God delivers the good news of eternal love.

Through suffering, afflicted people, through the people you'd least expect, God proclaims the gospel of hope and salvation.

We are clay jars. Nevertheless, God chooses us to hold the treasure and bear the love and light of Christ. That is why we may be afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.

Because we carry within us the world-changing good news that Jesus Christ died and rose again.

We have within our bodies—marked by the cross drawn on our foreheads during baptism—the fear-dispelling truth that Christ is not dead, but alive.

We bear within ourselves the life-giving gospel that even though death is at work in us and in our world, life is at work too—and because of Christ, life is always, always stronger than death.

We have this treasure in clay jars. God's message of salvation comes through the long-suffering, self-denying apostle Paul, not the superior, silver-tongued super-apostles.

We have this treasure in clay jars. God's message of love and hope comes through us, ordinary, unglamorous, imperfect people, not perfect saints or holy achievers.

We have this treasure in clay jars so that the extraordinary power and deeds of God may be made clear even through us.

May it be so.

AMEN.