

IMPERFECTIONS OF THE SOUL
October 9, 2016 –2 Corinthians 4: 7-15
The Church of the Covenant

In the sanctuary is an imperfection in the beautiful wooden ceiling tiles, just one of them, and I was going to note it at the beginning of my sermon, but not tell you where it is. But then I realized that you would then spend the rest of the sermon not listening to the sermon, but looking for the ceiling tile. So it is located over the choir, appropriately enough, almost directly over Darla, who never plays a wrong note on the pipe organ! Its right up there with the star of Bethlehem, stored on the ceiling until Christmas. But you never realized they were there until I drew attention to them...(Alternate for the 943 service...I deliberately changed something here in the 943 service to see if anyone noticed it and was planning on not telling anyone what it was, until I realized that then people would spend the entire service looking for it, instead of listening to the sermon! So I changed one of the letters up on the background –Our PRAISE is imperfect but our God whom we PRAISE IS perfect!)

Our scripture is from 2 Corinthians and is the passage about having *“this treasure in earthen vessels”* (2 Corinthians 4: 7) We are just a vessel of God’s Spirit, presence, faith and love. We hold it in our heart and in our life, but we are not it. We are the imperfection that points to God’s perfection. We are the place where Jesus now dwells through the Holy Spirit dwelling in our heart by faith. God is it; we are not it. God is perfect; we are not perfect. Thank God we do not have to be perfect. Thank God only God is perfect. We can let go of any need to “get it right”; our humanity will always “get it wrong”. God gets it right in our life; but we can never get it right in our life. Try as we may, we are not perfect. Only God sits on the throne. Only God is Sovereign. Only HE is worthy of our praise. We are at best imperfect vessels of what HE, God, seeks to pour out into our world through us.

So great cathedrals were always constructed in a way where at least something was deliberately imperfect. Like a wooden ceiling tile that doesn’t match the rest. Or a letter out of sequence on a backdrop or banner. Reminds us we are the vessel of the transcendent power of God; we are not ourselves the power. We hold the love; we are not the love. The Holy Spirit indwells us and so makes us holy; but we are not ourselves in our humanity intrinsically holy. I remember in the church I served in downtown Pittsburgh there was rumored to be a “church mouse” carved into the stone somewhere in the sanctuary. No one could find it. Every youth event we would charge the youth group to play hide and seek and to seek what was hidden and to find it. There was one ornery woman who was a dear friend of mine in that congregation who knew where the carved in stone church mouse was. And Peg was getting up in years. So I felt it my duty to pry the information out of her. But she had a bad experience with the church and with some pastor many years before. So she was tough and a bit bitter about the church. She was as the Bible says, “steadfast and immovable”. When the Bible says of God “HE will not be MOVED” it was speaking of Presbyterians in general and Peg in particular. So I baited her and said over and over again that she really didn’t know where the church mouse was hidden. Until one day after church she showed me a picture of the carved church mouse but snatched the photo out of my hand before I could see where it actually was. Like a good Presbyterian she was not moved and went to her grave with the knowledge of where the church mouse is. An imperfection perhaps?

But the earthen-ness of our vessel is related to the hardships in our life. The scripture says we are “afflicted in every way”; we are “perplexed”, “persecuted”, even “struck down”. But we are not “crushed”, nor driven to “despair” nor “destroyed” is the promise. We carry the marks of the crosses we face in our own lives on our bodies. But through those crosses we come to bear the “life of Jesus” in our body as well. Through the cross and through the earthen vessel comes the power of NEW LIFE in

Jesus. The imperfections and the trials in our lives only point to the LIFE of JESUS living in us, all the more. For it is JESUS who is the transcendent power at work in us. HE is the **treasure** in our heart and in our lives. HE, Himself, is the treasure held in the earthen vessel of our heart.

I wanted to do a nice thing for Janet Nevin when she was retiring as our Director of Christian Ed a couple of years ago. We talked and she has an earthenware pitcher collection. So I thought it would be nice to commission a local pottery to make an earthen pitcher that had her name, thanks from us as a congregation, the dates of her service, etc. So I went to the pottery and ordered it in August, long before her retirement. So I went to pick it up at the end of October only to discover that it wasn't a pitcher, it was a large crock. It wasn't what I ordered. I was displeased and my human-ness manifested itself in most unseemly ways, particularly for a preacher. I wasn't going to take it but needed a presentation piece. So the salesperson asked me what I wanted to do with the flawed pitcher. Discretion prohibits me from telling you what immediately popped into my mind to say. But I had a vision of hurling the crock off the back porch and seeing it explode into a thousand shards of worthless cracked pottery. Imperfection in the soul. Imperfection in the cracked pot. So I reordered the pitcher that I wanted, it being promised for December. And paid for and presented the imperfect crock to Janet at the December Session Meeting (with apologies). So the pitcher was due to be completed prior to her retirement ceremony that we scheduled in January. But bad weather cancelled the pot luck supper. Good thing, because the pitcher wasn't ready. Pot luck retirement rescheduled to February but also cancelled due to bad weather. Good thing, because the pitcher still wasn't ready. Finally, it is March and we are still trying to have Janet's Retirement Pot Luck Supper and I drive to the pottery only to be told that it still is not complete. So I sheepishly call Janet on the phone and ask her to again bring the imperfect, wrong CROCK to her farewell pot luck, to re-present it to her, again the wrong thing, delayed three months. Imperfections in the soul, in the crock, in the pot luck...in the pastor...For if I was displeased in November, I am apoplectic in March. So the pot luck day arrives and I re-present to Janet the incorrect crock she had to bring back to the church herself (how special and thoughtful!) instead of the pitcher I had ordered in August. And then she calls me on the phone later that night all apologetic that she "accidentally" dropped the crock and it splintered into a thousand shards, just as I had wished it to do. God laughs at our every attempt at perfection. No matter how hard we try we are just an earthen vessel. A cracked pot. A crock in the thousand shards. Imperfect. Flawed. But holding the life of Jesus in our hearts. After the pot luck Janet did get her pitcher, finally, imperfectly, and after the fact.

With this I conclude --Another friend gave me a story about a class that was given by their teacher a white page that had one single dot at the center of it. The assignment was for the class to describe what they saw. They all went off on lengthy descriptions of the dot at the center of the page. But no one described all the white space surrounding it. 99% of the page was white space; less than 1% was the dot. How easy it is to focus our lives only on the dot and not on the white space. To focus our thoughts and our heart on the one thing that is wrong, rather than the thousand things that are right. To focus on our imperfections. To focus on other people's imperfections. To see only the one ceiling tile that is flawed and different from the rest. The one thing in the room that is imperfect. How easy it is to focus only on the imperfect, to focus only on the dot.

It is a good thing that the Lord God Almighty does not focus on our imperfections. But that the Lord only focuses on the perfect life and the perfect work of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. We are just a cracked pot. But HE, Jesus, is the treasure held within the earthen vessel. God focuses on His perfect Son; not the imperfections of our soul. Amen and Amen.

By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, Pennsylvania
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!