

**SERMON TITLE:** “Jars of Clay”  
**TEXT:** 2 Corinthians 4  
**PREACHED AT:** Neighbourhood Church  
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INTRODUCTION: STORIES

We’re continuing our sermon series on 2 Corinthians. Sometimes people take an approach to the New Testament that looks something like this:

- Jesus, and the Gospels are where we go to get the stories about what God *did*;
- Paul, and his letters (along with other NT letters) are where we go to find out what the stories *mean*.

Jesus is where the action is; Paul is where the explanation is.

Of course this is a bit of a simplistic approach to the NT. Jesus did some explaining, after all. And through Paul we get a lot more than just doctrine—we get a window into the everyday world of the early church, and how they wrestled with the implications of who Jesus was and what he did.

But this view is a relatively common one: Jesus = *story*; Paul = *doctrine*.

Well, because we’re in the middle of one of Paul’s letters, and as a way of combating this caricature, today’s sermon is going to be a bit longer on story and a bit shorter on “explanation.”

God speaks through stories and I’m hopeful that we can learn from one this morning.

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A CLAY JAR

Last week I got a phone call from my grandmother. “Guess who I ran into at the MCC store today,” she said. “Who?” I replied, expecting an immediate answer.

Turns out, when she said “Guess who” that meant that she really *was* going to make me guess the identity of this mystery person and after about three minutes of futility and frustration—me guessing wildly, she providing me with mostly useless hints—I finally managed to squeeze a name out of her.

“Joe,” she said. Ah yes, Joe...

Some of you may have already heard a bit of Joe’s story, but from about 1999-2005 when we moved away from southern Alberta to go to Regent, Joe was a guest in our home for two weekends out of every month. We were his respite care providers.

As you can see, Joe is a very small man—he’s barely five feet tall, and I doubt he weighs more than 130 pounds. The most anyone could ever tell us about his background was that he came from Nunavut, way up to the north of Quebec. We never really knew how he made his way out to Alberta. We never really knew how old he was.

Joe had a mental disability. He was never formally “diagnosed” so we didn’t know the nature of his disability.

There was a lot of mystery about Joe.

Joe didn’t speak English, or any language really. At one point, one of his workers got an Inuit interpreter to see if he was speaking anything in his mother tongue, but after listening to him for a while she concluded that it was mostly gibberish. Joe could say simple things like “please,” “thank you,” and “no” but we couldn’t have a conversation with him.

Joe communicated in other ways. He would shake his head vigorously or raise his eyebrows if he liked something or start gesturing animatedly with his hands if he was agitated or nervous. Joe got his point across. And I think he understood a lot more than most people gave him credit for.

Joe was an early riser. Growing up on a farm, I was used to early mornings, but Joe surprised even me. There were mornings when he would get up at 3:30 or 4:00 am!

When we first got Joe, either Naomi or I got up when he did—we weren’t sure what he would do, if he would just walk out the front door or turn the stove on or who knows what else! But when Nicholas and Claire joined our family, we had to move his room downstairs and we could no longer hear him when he got up.

Joe usually just hopped out of bed whenever he woke up, and began to find things to amuse himself. Sometimes he would just wander around the basement “inspecting” things such as the washing machine or the furnace. Or he would turn on the TV and begin a “discussion” with the people on TV.

Or he would work on one of his puzzles or on his “thesis.” That is what Naomi and I jokingly call the symmetrical, meticulous arrangement of R’s and O’s, which filled up notebook after notebook on Joe’s desk. We never knew what it was about R’s and O’s that fascinated him—sometimes we would give him different sentences from the newspaper or something to copy out, and he would get it pretty much bang on for the first few lines, but gradually, inevitably, the lines would move toward R’s and O’s.

If we were being *really* lazy, and Joe was *really* getting hungry, he would come upstairs and poke his head down our hallway. I could always hear him, even though I knew he was doing his best to remain absolutely silent. If Joe came upstairs on his own, I knew it was time to get up.

Breakfast was always the same for Joe: a heaping bowl of porridge, two pieces of toast with raspberry jam, a banana and two big glasses of water. He was usually lost in thought or in conversation with himself when he ate, so I had to keep an eye on him. Sometimes he ate his toast upside down and the jam got all over his pajamas, or he sat too far away from the table and spilled all over his lap. Strangely, he usually found these indiscretions much more amusing than I did.

Joe always ate everything he was given, but no more. When he was done, he did an excruciatingly thorough job of wiping his hands, then folded his dirty napkin and put it beside his plate (or tried to give it to Naomi or I, much to our chagrin!).

Joe liked to help me do things and we filled our weekend days with a variety of tasks. We took away the recycling, shoveled the sidewalk and mowed the lawn. He liked it when I give him something to do.

Joe would make an absolutely useless worker in our result-oriented job market, where efficiency and speed are the objectives. Joe just would not measure up. He would start shoveling the sidewalk, but after a few minutes a board in the fence or a nail that was not lined up properly with the others would invariably sidetrack him.

Or, we would be pushing the lawnmower together when he would meander off to a tree or the shed to investigate things over there. If we were doing the recycling, Joe would individually take each can out and place (not throw) it into the proper receptacle. All in all, it was a highly inefficient way of doing things.

Joe came to church with us on Sundays. He would stand when we stood and sit when we sat. He would gesture at whoever happened to be speaking or singing at the front; he would scrutinize the contents of the hymnals. Sometimes, if he had been up particularly early that morning, he would even doze off.

On Sunday afternoons, Joe often came out to the farm to have Sunday lunch with my parents. He liked the dog, he enjoyed going and looking at the cows. Often, he would fall asleep after lunch while we visited.

In the evenings, Joe would watch TV with us or return to his puzzle or look through magazines. Or just sit there. He was usually ready for bed at around 8:00!

Joe's pajamas were way too big for him. I don't think they make men's pajamas small enough for Joe. He usually looked quite comical trudging around the basement with the legs of his pajamas dragging along behind him. He always had to get into bed the same way. The covers were first folded back and then halfway across the bed. Then, his glasses and his watch were placed on the nightstand beside him.

When he was finally lying down, Joe was usually too immersed in the urgent task of making sure that all of his blankets were perfectly aligned to hear me say good night, but I usually repeated myself until he heard me. Then he looks up at me as if to say, "What!?"

Can't you see that I have important things to take care of?" He would sometimes give me a courtesy wave; and then he would keep mumbling to himself until he fell asleep.

A day in the life of Joe.

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### TREASURES IN UNEXPECTED PLACES

So how does this story about Joe relate to the passage Jaime read earlier?

Joe is a clay jar. In fact, he is a cracked clay jar. In some ways, Joe's broken.

Of course, we don't like to talk about people with disabilities as "broken" people, but there is an inescapable truth to it. Joe couldn't write sentences and read books, he couldn't drive a car or order his own food at a restaurant, he couldn't hold a job or pay taxes. There are all kinds of things Joe *could* do—he could go to the swimming pool, do small jobs, come to church, go for walks. But in many ways, taking care of Joe was like taking care of another toddler.

What many people saw from the outside is a tiny old guy who is mentally handicapped and needs to be taken care of. But they would have missed a lot of the story.

What I learned from Joe, though, is a very simple gospel truth. God's truth shines comes to us through imperfect channels.

Our text this morning talks about treasures in ordinary vessels. What kinds of treasures did I see in the "clay jar" that was Joe?

Well, as I look back on our time spent with Joe, I see a lot of treasures. I saw:

- Delight in creation
- Simplicity
- Gratitude
- Joy
- Trust
- Patience
- Mercy
- Compassion
- Graciousness in suffering

Joe smiled and laughed a lot, and he didn't hurt people with the things that he said and did.

Joe was a clay jar through which treasure shone through.

Yet some days, as I turned out the lights on Joe at bedtime, I would feel a twinge of regret or disappointment. As I look back on my time with Joe, this feeling is even more acute.

Too often, I got frustrated with little things that he did. He ate too slowly, he spilled food all over himself, he sat too close to the TV, he walked too slowly, and he talked too much. All of these things were inconvenient for me!

I would get annoyed with him for getting up and talking and wildly gesticulating at the TV in the evening, but why did I consider this odd behaviour? Is it not more peculiar that I could sit for hours at a time staring at a little black box in my living room?

Joe saw people moving around and talking on the screen and wanted to talk back. He assumed that a response was required, or at least legitimate, when he saw activity and conversation, even if it was coming out of some annoying little box.

I would get irritated when he would take forever to get dressed, and then, once that task was finally accomplished, proceed to painstakingly fold and arrange yesterday's ensemble. "Just leave it!" I would think to myself. But nothing was so urgent that it would keep Joe from folding his clothes, making his bed or arranging his shoes (laces out) properly.

When we went for a walk Joe was always three steps behind me. As you can see, his legs aren't very long so he didn't move quickly at the best of times, but he was also completely absorbed in other activities, such as talking to the birds, counting the power poles or examining the mailbox. Meanwhile, I would impatiently glare back at him, wondering why he had to take so long.

***Too often, I treated Joe like a task to accomplish or an item to check of my weekend list instead of a treasure to enjoy and learn from!***

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## TWO TRUTHS ABOUT CLAY JARS

There are two truths about clay jars that I think we can learn from Joe's story and from the passage Jaime read earlier.

### 1. WE ARE JUST CLAY JARS.

Well, just like I sometimes focused on the clay jar of Joe—the physical and mental limitations, the inconvenience, the demands he made on my life, etc—so the church in Corinth was making judgments about Paul and his suitability to be a messenger of the gospel based on his outward appearances.

The Corinthian church wasn't very impressed with Paul—as a speaker, or as a person. They didn't like what they saw when they looked at the clay jar—it wasn't a very impressive picture:

- they saw that he was in and out of trouble
- they saw that he wasn't very compelling in public
- they saw that he was a poor public speaker

- they saw that he was constantly harassed and persecuted
- they saw very little remarkable about him

They thought that he surely ought to look more important if he really was a messenger with a message from the living God. If the messenger wasn't very attractive, what did that say about the message?

Paul's response? That's the point!! The clay jar is chosen precisely for its ordinariness—precisely to *not* get in the way of the message. It's to remind us that *we* aren't the point. *God* is.

The treasure is what's important, not the container. If it wasn't like this, the containers might start to get a little full of themselves!

We human beings are very good at stealing God's thunder, aren't we? This was the original sin—wanting to be like God, striving and seizing credit for what only God is supposed to be and do.

This is a constant temptation in the Christian life. It's very easy, when we do or say something that God uses in a unique or helpful way, for pride to creep in. All of a sudden it becomes about *my* gifts, *my* abilities and talents, *my* discernment, compassion, insight or whatever else.

Yesterday morning was a great morning! It was delivery day for our community outreach project, and we had a fantastic turnout of those looking to help load trucks and deliver stuff to those in need around our community.

*But* the point wasn't so people would think, "Oh, wow, what a *great church* they must be from! What wonderful *people!*" Even if the people we helped might have thought or said something like that, that wasn't why we did it.

Why did we do it? 2 Cor. 4:5-6

*<sup>5</sup> For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. <sup>6</sup> For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.*

We did it because "the light of God has shone in our hearts" and we want this to spread.

It's not about us, it's about God.

We see an example this in the gospel of John (John 3:22-31):

John the Baptist's disciples are getting annoyed because everyone is flocking to be baptized by Jesus. John's response is found in John 3:30-31:

<sup>30</sup> *He must become greater; I must become less.*"

<sup>31</sup> *The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all.*

He must become greater. We must become less.

So, the first truth that I hope we can take from this is that we need to remember that we are *just* clay jars. As the sign outside our church says, "There are two truths: 1) There is a God; 2) You are not him!

## 2. WE ARE NOT *JUST* CLAY JARS

Now, you're probably thinking that this is a flat-out contradiction! How can I say that we are just clay jars and not just clay jars?!

I think there is a danger in taking the first truth too far. We can downplay the unique contribution that only we contribute to the kingdom *too much*.

I've seen this happen often. Someone will be congratulated or commended for doing a good job, and the response will be, "Oh, well it had *nothing* to do with me; it was *all* God."

This isn't healthy either because it doesn't tell the whole story. There is a unique contribution to the kingdom of God that each of us can make. There is only one of you and one of me, and God works through each one of us in unique ways.

There is a difference between pride and arrogantly seeking attention and gratefully acknowledging that it *does* have *something* to do with us because God has set thing up that way!

Luckily 2 Corinthians 4 isn't the only part of the Bible that talks about clay jars! Paul knew his Jewish Scriptures extremely well, and he would have been very well aware of this passage from Isaiah:

Isaiah 64:8-9 (after a lament about how nobody hears/obeys God):

*Yet, O LORD, you are our Father.*

*We are the clay, you are the potter;*

*we are all the work of your hand.*

<sup>9</sup> *Do not be angry beyond measure, O LORD;*

*do not remember our sins forever.*

*Oh, look upon us, we pray,  
for we are all your people.*

We may be “just” clay jars, but we are also the valuable work of the Master potter. Each of us was made for a reason. We were intended to be!

We need both of these truths:

1. We are just clay jars—God and his light and truth are the point, not us. We must decrease, he must increase.
2. We are more than just clay jars—we are the dearly loved work of the potter. God has seen fit for us to be one of the ways that his light shines out of the darkness

And this is why I told Joe’s story this morning. Joe reminds me of both truths.

He reminds me that treasures come from the most unlikely places. Joe is a broken clay jar, yet he taught me things about life, about human beings, and about God that I couldn’t have learned in any other way.

Joe reminds me of the hidden, background, unobtrusive, unassuming way that the message of the kingdom spreads. Joe doesn’t push to the front of the line or demand recognition or attention. He has no illusions of his own importance. He is well suited to convey treasure!

Joe also reminds me the even though clay jars aren’t worth much by some criteria—even though all of us, as fragile, fallen human beings, are “handicapped” in all kinds of ways (mentally, spiritually, relationally, physically, emotionally)—*we are still the work of the potter.*

We are image-bearers of a good God who delights in his creation.

So, two truths

- We are “just” jars of clay
- We are more than just jars of clay.

Both are true. Both tell an important part of the story of God works through jars of clay like you and like me.

And Like Joe.

Thanks be to God.