

Season after Pentecost - Treasure in Clay

June 4/5, 2016

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Matthew 5:13; 2 Corinthians 4: 1-12

*Away at the DE-MD Synod Assembly Wednesday to Saturday, I offer you today excerpts from a sermon by **Rev. Dr. Joanna Adams**¹ and a chapter from **Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber**'s latest book, *Accidental Saints*, with a few adaptations and additions. I pray this written and spoken word will lead us to the living, Word, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

"God's Cracked Pots"

"The subject that Paul is addressing in this letter is his own experience in the ministry. He wants to make clear to his friends in Corinth that he believes that the source of his ability to articulate the gospel is not found in himself. The credit belongs to God and to God alone. "We have this treasure, in earthen vessels, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." Now it is true that Paul is writing about the inherent limitations of his own mortal ministers but the point he makes is a universal one. We are all called into God's mission. We are all "clay jars" in which the love, forgiveness, grace and eternity of God has been poured since our baptism.

"[To be clay jars] is not bad news, it is simply the truth, and only the truth will allow us to be free and human in the way God intended. Here is the truth: from dust we came, to dust we will return, and for the time we are on this earth, what we are is somewhat analogous to a piece of pottery. Useful to be sure, but also subject to chipping and cracking and likely to contain imperfections. Earthen vessels have little reason to boast. The most appropriate attitude for them is humble gratitude for the privilege of serving a function in the eternal scheme of things." We are all clay jars. And dare I say, we are all cracked pots" in which the love, forgiveness, grace and eternity of God has been poured since our baptism.

Where did people get the idea that being human is about being perfect, and since when did that notion ever get wrapped up with Christianity? It is destructive to the human spirit and to the human community to believe that we have to be something we are not in order to be loved by God and accepted by one another. Mortals, by definition, are limited

and imperfect. Only God is perfect in action and infinite in being.” What is truly shocking and amazing is that God loves us, cracks and all, AND chooses **us** to become the means of bringing redemptive healing and hope to others.

It may not be easy to accept the "clay jarness" of human existence, and we will not be ushered into the easy life when and if we do. In fact, [when we live our lives following Jesus] the opposite is likely to happen. Letting the Lord work in and through us will bring constant challenges. But as Paul discovered, ‘We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed’.... What all of this says to me is that we are going to make it, you and I. There is a big difference between being [hard-pressed] , which we will be, and being done in, which we will not be, thanks to the grace of God. [What Paul seems to be saying] is that if we are true in ourselves and to God, we will likely have a life that has its share of trouble, but our lives and their troubles will not get the best of us. According to Paul, this resilient strength is made available to us by the mysterious power unleashed on the world by Jesus' death [and resurrection.] ‘His risen life is being made visible in our mortal flesh.’” This is the mystery at the heart of the Christian religion and it is our conviction that [this is how] God is at work repairing the world” The resurrection power of God has been set loose. The healing and transforming love of God is put in we clay jars to redeem and reclaim all of God’s creation. “Us?” you say? “Me?” Yes, us... and you... and me... and Nadia Bolz-Weber.

Nadia Bolz-Weber is the very unorthodox, Lutheran, forty-ish founding pastor of the worship community, “House for All Sinners and Saints” in Denver, Colorado. The leadership team of the 2012 National Youth Gathering to meet in New Orleans wanted her to be their lead off speaker. Nadia herself and many others were opposed to the idea. Nadia because she didn’t think she could speak meaningfully to teens. Others for the kind and number of “cracks” in her clay. Eventually, Nadia reluctantly accepted, unconvinced it was a good idea and terrified of blowing it all the way up to the time she stepped on stage.

On her flight to New Orleans she ended up next to a teen named Chloe. She was painfully shy and sketched Manga, Japanese-style animated figures, during the entire ride. Eventually Chloe spoke of her life: “not knowing who her father was, the restraining order against her older sister who hurt her badly last year,” the school and even the youth group where she just didn’t fit in. Nadia and Chloe hugged as they disembarked the plane. Chloe thanked Nadia for talking to her and gave her a Manga sketch she had made of Nadia.

When Nadia approached the stage of the SuperDome to speak in front of tens of thousands of teens, she took out the Manga sketch from her hip pocket and decided she was just going to talk to Chloe, the girl who didn’t fit. Nadia tells it this way:

“So I told my story: a girl who didn’t fit, raised fundamentalist Christian, left church, entered addiction, got clean, met nice Lutheran boy, became Lutheran, became Lutheran pastor, started church.”

“Some of your parents and pastors were really upset that I was your speaker tonight. They thought someone with my past shouldn’t be allowed to talk to thousands of teenagers. And you know what I have to say about that?” (*she paused*) “They are absolutely right.” Silence in the Superdome but she took a deep breath and continued.

“Somebody with my past of alcoholism and drug abuse and promiscuity and lying and stealing shouldn’t be allowed to talk to you. But you know what? Somebody with my present, who I am now, shouldn’t be allowed to either. I am a sarcastic, heavily tattooed , angry person who swears like a truck driver! I am a flawed person who really should not be allowed to talk to you. But you know what?” she asked “That’s the God we are dealing with, people!” And the kids went nuts — clapping, screaming, and on their feet.

Floored by the response, she eventually continued. “Let me tell you about this God,” she said.“ This is a God who has always used imperfect people... this is a God who walked among us and who ate with all the wrong people and kissed lepers.... this is a God who rose from the dead and grilled fish on the beach with his friends and then ascended to

heaven and is especially present to us in the most offensively ordinary things: wheat, wine, water, word.... this God has *never* made sense.”

“And you don’t need to either, “ she told them, “because this God will use you, this God will use all of you, and not just your strengths, but your failures and your failings. Your weakness is fertile ground for a forgiving God to make something new and to make something beautiful, so don’t ever think that all you have to offer are your gifts. That’s what it looks like to be a Lutheran.” And again the room exploded.²

“For we do not proclaim ourselves,” Paul writes” we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord.” It all depends on whether you get caught up in the cracks of the vessel you are OR you choose to focus on the God who created us and the light that can shine through our cracks. As Bolz-Weber writes, “Without higher-quality material to work with, God resorts to working through us for others and upon us through others. Those are some weirdly restorative, disconcerting shenanigans to be caught up in: God forcing God’s people to see themselves as God sees them, to do stuff they know they are incapable of doing, so that God might make use of them, and make them to be both humble recipients and generous givers of grace, so that they may be part of God’s big project on earth, so that they themselves might find unexpected joy through surprising situations.”³ We are invited to participate in the "invisible drama" that is the life and death of Christ. The power behind it all is God, who makes light to shine in the dark places, who dares to place treasure in earthen vessels.⁴ We are neither to be proud or ashamed of the cracks in our selves or lives. They make us no more or less loved by God. But we can rejoice that in the hands of God, all we are and experience can be transformed by grace to bring light and love to the world. That is what we are meant to do with these imperfect, clay lives we are. Be all you can be for God’s redeeming mission, in the name of the Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

ENDNOTES

1. The Rev. Dr. Joanna Adams "Treasure in Clay Jars" 2 Corinthians 4:5-12 May 10, 1998 as posted on www.1day.org

2. Nadia Bolz-Weber, [Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People](#) Convergent Books: 2015 story and quotes pp 34-40 WARNING: As inspiring and insightful as this book is, it is laced with four-letter and other curse words.

3. Nadia Bolz-Weber p. 40

4. Joanna Adams