

“The Power in Clay Jars”
2 Corinthians 4:5-12
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August 6, 2017

The Power in Cracked Pots
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2 Corinthians 4:5-12 “For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake. 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.

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. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. 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. So death is at work in us, but life in you.”

When did you feel most powerful? Was there a time in your life when you felt really capable and in control? Maybe that time is now. Or perhaps when you reached a career or personal goal, or an athletic achievement. Maybe it was when you fell in love.

I recall one of these points in my life, in my mid-30s. I'd say I was feeling pretty much on top of my game. I had advanced quickly and far in my career, our marriage was happy (still is!). We had one healthy daughter and another on the way, a comfortable home. While there were certainly ups and downs, I was feeling pretty invincible at that point; high achieving, hard working, and it was paying off.

During that time, with some status in my job I was leading a body of work which would be one of the most impactful of my career. And I had planned it perfectly - I would wrap up the company-wide rollout of this initiative right before our daughter was due to be born, and then I would take a few months off to be at home with her and enjoy the fruits of my labor – quite literally!

Well, all those carefully laid plans collapsed when Jenna decided she wanted to come into the world long before she was due. Instead of finishing the nursery and perfectly implementing my work, we were camped out in the neonatal intensive care unit praying that Jenna would figure out how to eat and breath at the same time – something none of us take for granted anymore! With a toddler at home and no family here to help, this was a pretty stressful and anxious time. And nothing which I could control. Suddenly, everything felt fragile and uncertain. These were not feelings I was accustomed to.

Long after Jenna finally came home and was thriving, I was reflecting on what we had been through and realized that this time in my life - when my limitations were more apparent than ever, when I had to toss my agenda and plans, when I felt powerless – was the first many such times when I experienced the most significant spiritual growth of my life. It was the pivot point for me; the point when my shell of self-sufficiency began to crack. That was the beginning of my growing awareness of God's very real grace. And *that's* when I began to feel powerful, not because of my own power, but because of God's.

What was your pivot point? Can you think of a time when you realized God's love and grace in a way deeper than any Sunday school class, or sermon, or Bible study could teach? Can you look back on a point in your life and know you only got through it by God's grace?

My guess is that like mine, your experiences of spiritual growth have also occurred in times of significant vulnerability – job loss, health scares, or other

of life's major changes. If you were lucky, you noticed in the midst of those difficulties that a power greater than you was carrying you through it. Many of us, though, don't realize it until we look back and process all that happened. Then, if we're paying attention, we see with clarity our vulnerability and the power outside of us that pulled us back up and through. These moments of clarity are times of significant spiritual growth; growth that occurs only in the fertile soil of vulnerability.

In my first sermon with you back in June, I shared the three characteristics of congregations that navigate interim periods successfully – successfully meaning they come out of their transition stronger and more vibrant. While the labels vary, these findings are consistent study after study. The first characteristic is the congregation's willingness to heal, the second – the congregation's willingness to grow spiritually, and the third is their willingness to re-commit to their core purpose.

I spent time in that sermon on the first, healing. I'll talk about the willingness to commit to our core purpose on September 10th, when we kick off the fall program season. But today, I want us to consider our willingness to grow spiritually, informed by today's scripture lesson. Note the word *willingness*. Spiritual growth does require a willingness, a willingness to let ourselves be vulnerable, and dependent on God.

Well-known research professor, author and speaker, Dr. Brené Brown, whose work I understand you studied when Pastor Corey was here, has spent more than 16 years studying vulnerability. Her findings were not at all what she expected when she began. She says she "hijacked her own data"¹ when that data pointed to a deep truth she'd rather avoid – the importance of embracing vulnerability. Dr. Brown says at the time she resented her findings. (Because really, who wants more vulnerability, right?!) Yet Brown couldn't

¹ <http://brenebrown.com/research/>

deny the transformative powers of vulnerability clearly visible in example after example of ordinary lives. Her own life has been no exception. She said in a recent interview that looking back on her life, the most beautiful things happened when she came out from under things she didn't know she could get out from underneath.² *When she came out from under things she didn't know she could get out from underneath.*

We've all been there, those times when we get through something that we would have never imagined we'd get through. Times we look back on and see, as Paul describes, we were "afflicted but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, struck down but not destroyed (v. 8). Brené Brown's research showed that those vulnerable times are the times in our lives of the greatest growth. People of faith know that those are also the time when we grow closer to God.

Ugh though. Most of us, like Brown, would much rather avoid vulnerability. Our culture values human power, strength and success. We expect that of ourselves AND we expect it from others – even to the point that when we see vulnerability in someone else we find we need to rescue them from it, rather than joining them in it so that all of us can be transformed together.

We're all fragile and vulnerable though, just some fragility is more visible than others. It seems the invisible frailty is often the hardest to face – lack of self-confidence, or fear of failing. The need to be right, or pressure to succeed. But whether it's emotional, or physical, or economic vulnerability, we're all "clay jars", as the apostle Paul describes us. It's a great metaphor really. Clay jars, like humans, have a façade of strength. They look strong when glazed, and also pretty when painted. But clay jars are fragile. They crack and break easily.

² Krista Tippett, interview with Brené Brown, On Being podcast audio, January 29, 2015, <https://onbeing.org/programs/brene-brown-the-courage-to-be-vulnerable/>

Our passage today should be a source of great comfort in our vulnerability, AND a reason to embrace our limitations and step into those places in which we might be vulnerable. Paul says, "We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us" (v. 7). Paul says it three different ways in four verses. In our fragility, God's power can be made known and God's light can shine. God works through fragile human vessels so that the depths of God's grace and love would be visible for all to see. So here's the thing: when we fail to allow ourselves to be vulnerable, we fail to access the full power of God that is made perfect in our weakness (2 Cor 12:9).

I can't tell you how many times in conversations with people returning from mission trips to the most impoverished places in the world, places we ironically call "God forsaken places" I've heard them describe how amazed they were by the deep faith of the people there, a deep faith despite their apparent circumstances. People in that kind of poverty cannot shield themselves from their vulnerability like we can. They do not have worldly comforts of money, success, and material things camouflaging their deepest needs and dependence on God. Their vulnerability is right out there for them and all to see.

Our own prayer partner congregation in Fairouzeh, Syria, teaches us what this faith looks like. With the violence and destruction of war all around them, many practice their faith unsure whether they or their loved ones will be killed for attending Christian church. In their choice to follow Jesus, they are intimately aware of their dependence on God. When you talk with Christians in Syria, you marvel at their spiritual maturity, you're envious of it in fact, knowing we have so far to go. They know their power to endure does not come from them, or from any person really. It comes from God. As Pastor Yacoub acknowledges, "Fairouzeh is powered by God."

Now that is spiritual maturity. Spiritual growth doesn't come from reading the right books, or reciting the proper doctrine, or from all the expertise in the world. It's not about finding the wisest preacher or teacher. It's about intimacy. Growing so intimately aware of God's love and grace that we are changed by it. Spiritually mature people recognize both their vulnerability and their dependence on God's power, in whose grace and love they are transformed.

Catholic priest, writer and theologian, Henri Nouwen, in his book on Christian leadership, says that the vision Jesus had of spiritual maturity was "an ability and willingness to be led where you would rather not go."³ This was the willingness Jesus demonstrated and what he asked of his disciples. He told them that if they wanted to follow him they had to deny themselves (Matt 16:24). When we try to follow Christ's way, and depend on God's grace completely as Jesus did, we deny parts of ourselves, we let go of our need for power and control and certainty. And in that letting go, the great comfort of today's lesson become real. As we let those parts of us die, Paul assures us that the life of Jesus is made visible, the life of mercy and consolation, of hope and resurrection. It is in our vulnerability – that moment of letting go of certainty – that we experience the power of God lifting us up and through.

I'll close with an image for you; from the time when I learned to water ski. My brother was driving the boat. As I was tossing the skis into the water and getting ready to jump in – quite uncertain how the heck I was going to do this - he was giving me instructions, which started with – "all you have to do...." I should have known. Any time someone starts an explanation with "all you have to do" you should be prepared this will be a lot harder than it looks!

Well, oh my gosh, it was. I started out with about 12 face plants – which if you haven't skied, is like a 25 mph belly flop – except on your face! But I

³ Henri J. M. Nowen, *In the Name of Jesus, Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company), 81.

kept trying – because I can be pretty tenacious – pulling and leaning, determined to get up.

But after several attempts, it was a different set of instructions that finally got me up; when my brother called, "Let the boat pull you up." *Let the boat do the work.* In other words, your power will come from the boat. Don't resist.

I can feel it as I talk about it now. I held my core tight, bent my knees slightly to stand firm, and I put on my game face - because that always worked for Michael Jordan. *And the boat pulled me up.* The *boat* did. Not by my power but the boat's.

Like in my skiing experience, acknowledging where the real power will come from allows us to put ourselves out there, not fully knowing where we're going or how it will turn out, but instead trusting in God's persistent grace and love. And this is why the willingness to grow spiritually is a characteristic of churches which experience successful transitions. Because as we willingly step out of our perceived comforts, letting go of our anxiety and desire to control, and embracing uncertainty, God's power in us will be revealed. And we'll look back through our cracked pots and discover that power lifting us up beyond what we could ever have done ourselves. And that would be transformative.

To God be the glory. Amen.