



“THE POTTER’S HOUSE”
SCRIPTURE: PSALM 139; 2 CORINTHIANS 4: 5-12
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
June 3, 2018

The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

4:5 For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake.

4:6 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.

4:7 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.

4:8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair;

4:9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;

4:10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

4:11 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.

4:12 So death is at work in us, but life in you.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

***Note to the reader: during the sermon, potter Keith Prince put a pot back together again. In the sung portions of the sermon Jen Folkers and Jeff Jones assisted. These things are noted parenthetically in the body of the sermon.**

(Keith quietly comes up to chancel at table and motions people with fragments/pieces to come forward. As they come forward, Keith takes the pieces and gives each person a hug. Jeff plays intro and Marcia sings first verse of The Potter's house as Keith takes fragments/pieces.)

In case you have fallen by the wayside of life

Dreams and visions shattered, you're all broken inside

You don't have to stay in the shape that you're in
The potter wants to put you back together again
Oh, the potter wants to put you back together again
(repeat last line a couple of times if Keith still taking pieces)

Blessin is her name. Blessin Giraldo.
Loved and cherished in a complicated world.
Beautiful and powerful. Struggling and crumbling. Singing and stepping.
Weighed down with her mother's depression and anger and her father's absence.
No food in the refrigerator. Violence in the Baltimore streets that helped to raise her.
Blessin is a force—strong, passionate.

Everyone needs something to hold onto—something that stitches meaning and possibility, hope and connection into each day. For Blessin it was her Step team, “The Lethal Ladies,” she founded it when she was in 6th grade at her Charter school, the Baltimore Leadership School for Young Women.

“You don’t have to rely on the beat,” Blessin said about step. “You *are* the beat. You create the beat. So whatever you want it to be, whatever direction you want it to go in, you can put it in that direction. It’s creativity.”¹

Blessin Giraldo is an artist. A survivor. A dreamer. A shero. And some things that she does won’t please you; if you really listen, if you really see who she is, she will inspire you. She will humble you.

But the last thing she would want is for you to lose yourself in her story, in her beat—the world’s too torn up for that. You need to find your step, you need to step out, you need to live into and out of your fragments to be fully alive, and to make the world a place where love can thrive.

Saul was his name, until Paul was his name because so much about him had changed. Revered and reviled. Inspiring and anger-inducing. An evangelist of grace and salvation in a world with fractures and fissures in its foundations that were shaking things up, breaking things down.

Paul didn’t do things the way others before him had done them. He carved out new pathways—on that dusty road to Damascus—his blindness and mean-spiritedness were the scalpel to the soul God used to make his life speak healing truth into ours.

The Corinthian church had jagged edges and distorted ideas—grace obscured, good news turned to the service of harmful things. Paul’s eyes could see that church—and because the shards of his life in God’s hands had redeemed him, he knew their brokenness was the place he had to start.

“God... has shone in our hearts... the glory of God [shines in our hearts] 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.”

We are clay jars, you and me. Clay jars, with cracks and uneven edges, with worn places and signs of repair and despair, with places made stronger by the mending, with places tender to the touch—places that can only survive with gentleness and tender care.

We’re all clay pots—every single one of us. Even, no especially, those of us who try so hard to conceal the broken places, who try so hard to hide the parts of us that are shattered—that are crumbling, we are clay pots.

(Jeff play intro, Marcia sings verse 2 of The Potter’s House)

In case your situation has turned upside down
And all that you've accomplished, is down on the ground
You don't have to stay in the shape that you're in
The potter wants to put you back together again
Oh, the potter wants to put you back together again

Living your truth can be stressful and liberating. For so long, I could only bear to let the brokenness of others speak the Gospel truth. My fragments were too ugly to show anyone—too jagged, too impossible to fit back together again.

And that impulse to hide it all away, to keep it secret—I didn’t learn that on my own. The streets I grew up on taught me that—the streets of an idyllic small town where certain unfortunate events were never to be spoken of, the streets of “everything is fine here.” And it wasn’t just the streets that taught me to keep quiet—to keep going like everything was fine, to endure, to normalize, to make sure no one could see the pieces, the broken pieces. No it wasn’t just the beautiful tree-lined streets and well-kept yards and gracious front porches. It was church. It was scripture. It was how I was taught to succeed and to be better, to strive for perfection—you know they say Paul said that, too. Strive for perfection.

And so I did.

And perfection didn’t have problems like I had—an abusive boy friend, the shame of sexual violence, the secret desperation I felt when I looked out my teenage bedroom window and wondered if the world even cared if I lived or died. Those fragments mingled with me the straight-A student, the Student Council president, the state

championship runner, the preacher on youth Sunday. I was getting up everyday and doing more than just living, I was achieving, I was succeeding, I was having a positive impact, and I was broken.

Laura Levitt, Jewish, Feminist, scholar and Professor of Religion at Temple University, rape survivor said:

To speak out is, at least for me, a cry for acknowledgment. I want to be seen in my multiple identities. I am all of these things as a survivor: frightened, angry, strong, vulnerable, and brave. Sometimes when we are strong this seems to cancel out the fact that we are also terribly frightened. . . . What I want is a clear sense of my own complexity. I am afraid of having to be OK too soon. I want my friends and family to know that I hurt and that despite my strength, I am very tired. ~Laura Levitt²

Seigle Avenue Presbyterian Church taught me about the beautiful ways God uses our broken pieces—and the way God wanted to use mine, my fragments, my pieces that didn't fit together anymore. That's where the mosaics of our suffering testified to me of Christ's redemption.

I learned songs by heart, and I cried in church. I stood up and I stepped out—I eventually was moved by the Spirit to preach a sermon there about a woman who was raped and I let them know, that congregation of clay pots, that that woman and I shared that story. And they gave me one of the most healing moments in my life—a moment that taught me something new about how God can work through brokenness in the church—they stood and shouted and clapped their affirmation for the way the fragments of who I was spoke to them about the glory of who God is.

I wouldn't be here today without that moment—that God infused moment when I finally came out from under the weight of my secret shame and let God be God in my life.

God is that powerful, that wonderful, that creative, that alive for you and for me, for us, for the world—if we can't live the story, if we can't let our clay pots hold God's living water for the world, then who are we really, Grace Covenant?

(Marcia go to Table)

Not only is there room for your brokenness at this table, we are distorting the Gospel if we don't proclaim Christ's redemption with our own clay pots—who are you to obscure the message Jesus died and rose to speak with his broken bones, his pierced hands, his public humiliation, the false accusations, the betrayal—after all

he went through for us to be free, who are any of us to try and cover up the glory of how His powerful loves shimmers and testifies in our clay pots.

Without your brokenness and my brokenness this Table becomes a strange formality, an empty repetition, a relic of a moderated and languishing culture that doubted its own capacity for truth—and so feasted on a sanitized Jesus who doesn't really have the time or patience for anybody's problems.

We might not hoard the bread and guzzle the wine like the first at the table did at Corinth, but our willful concealment of how Jesus is working in our lives is just as destructive and just as dismissive of what the world needs from us. The world does not need our self-righteousness or our feigned perfection, the world needs our clay pots in all their God-infused glory, to tell the stories only we can tell—of how the fragments of our broken lives tell the truth of God's unparalleled power to raise and redeem the lost and shattered pieces of our pain.

(Keith gives Marcia the pot and Marcia puts it on the Communion Table)

Do you believe God is at work in you this way? That the dead things, and the languishing parts, and the shards of you that you think are the ugliest and the most shattered, the most jagged and the most ill-fitting, are the part of us that testify the loudest, the most clearly about who God really is and what it is that God can do? Do you believe that?

If you do, let this Table feed your ability to share the joy of God's healing power. And if you don't, come to the Table hungry for the truth that can set you free from the shame that Jesus seeks to heal in you.

“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.”

Your fragments are a beautiful song of redemption—let's them sing, let them dance, let them step, let them testify.

(Marcia is at Table, Jen on chancel. Richard joins Marcia at Table. Marcia and Jen sing first three lines together. Jen sings the next three. Marcia, Jen, and Richard sing “the potter wants to put you back together again.”)

You don't have to stay in the shape that you're in.
The Potter wants to put you back together again.
Oh, the Potter wants to put you back together again.
You who are broken, stop by the potter's house
You who need mending, stop by the potter's house

Give Him the fragments of your broken life
My friend, the potter wants to put you back together again
Oh, the potter wants to put you back together again

The feast is ready for you.

Thanks be to God.

¹ Gia Kourlas, "In 'Step,' Finding a Language for Hopes, Fears and Dreams," *The New York Times*, August 8, 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/08/arts/dance/step-documentary-amanda-lipitz.html>

² Laura Levitt, "Speaking out of the Silence around Rape: A Personal Account," *Fireweed* 41 [Fall 1993].