

24 August 2003
St. Bartholomew

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Treasure in Jars of Clay”

Text: 2 Corinthians 4:7-10; Luke 22:24-30

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

There is an old *Peanuts* comic where I think it's Linus who says, “*Mankind I like; it's people I could do without.*” I bring that up because that mindset is something like the situation that the Apostle Paul is getting at when in writing to the Corinthians, he said: “***But we have this treasure in jars of clay . . .***”

For the “clay” that Paul is speaking of there is the “human-ness” of the Church. The fact that the Church, which contains such a great treasure, the saving and precious Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, is made up of sinful people. Of people who fail. Of people who let us down. And if you doubt that, take a look at some of the things happening in the Church today. The scandal of pedophile priests and pastors. The official approval in one denomination of an openly homosexual bishop, and the push of others towards approval of same-sex unions. Christian leaders joining together with pagans in religiously-adulterous worship services. There is denominational infighting and politics. Churches and congregations fighting and splitting. And even within congregations there is offense given and taken. Harsh words, disagreements, personality conflicts, pastors and people hurting each other. We very well might paraphrase Linus' words: “*The Church I like; it's the people I could do without.*”

But this is nothing new. Old Testament Israel failed her Lord frequently and repeatedly; the early church was rent asunder by heresy and schism; and we heard today in the Holy Gospel of the infighting among our Lord's 12 apostles. Fighting, disputing – and probably politicking – “***as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.***” And among those twelve was a man named Bartholomew, whose life we remember and commemorate this day. For even though he is not among the more well-known of the twelve, we can be sure that he was in there, in the scrap, fighting for *his* position in the pecking order. Tradition says of Bartholomew that he was born of nobility and was a man of some wealth, and so he would have some argument for being in the top tier, it would seem. But is this how men of God, companions of Christ, future leaders of the Church . . . are supposed to act? “***We have this treasure in jars of clay . . .***”

And unfortunately, what happens because of this fact, because the Church, and her apostles, and her pastors and people are sinners, are jars of clay, there is the inclination by many to seek to bypass the Church and all of this bother and mess, and seek to go directly to God. Because its *cleaner*. Its *easier*. It doesn't make me deal with the people, with the sinners. . . . And so what happens is that God is then sought out not in the Church, but often times in mystical, or spiritual, experiences. Ways are sought to elevate the mind and soul out of the body, out of this world, out of these jars of clay, and to *escape* into what is thought to be a "more spiritual" communion with God. And so instead of Church and liturgy, and apostles and doctrine, and means of grace, people then turn to emotional experiences, meditation, visions, spiritual journeys, and other personal, mystical experiences that are thought to be more "effective" ways of communion with God. With the goal of "being spiritual," of being with and of God, and at the same time putting aside, and bypassing, and getting rid of, the messy, sinful, people part! "*God, you I like; it's your people I could do without!*"

And its tempting, isn't it? To want to escape. When you're tired of the struggle; when you're tired of striving for the truth; when you're tired of being around all of these imperfect people, these jars of clay around you . . .

But there is a problem with that kind of religion . . . and His name is Jesus Christ. *For the incarnation deals a death-blow to all forms of escapism*. Because in order to deal with the problem of our sinful human-ness and our offensiveness, God did not tell us to try to *escape* this world and our sinful human nature and somehow mystically get away from it all by spiritually ascending into Heaven. **No, He came down.** He came right down into it! The Father sent His Son down into this world of sin and offense, to take on our human nature, and become a man. . . . And there was never a greater treasure in a jar of clay than the Son of God in the person of Jesus Christ. The Creator of the world as a creature. The One who feeds every living thing lying in a manger, messing His diapers, and feeding at His mother's breast. The all-powerful One, walking on this earth and getting tired and thirsty and hungry. The Author of all life, hung bleeding and dying on a cross. And even though He was sinless in every way, still He was an offense, a stumbling block, to many. To many who could simply not believe that God would take on human flesh, a jar of clay. To many who could simply not believe that God would eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners. To many who could simply not believe that God would die as a criminal on a cross for those, and in the place of those, who deserved to die that death themselves. It just doesn't make sense that God would do that!

But do it He did! Not so that we might escape *from* sin, but so that our sin might be forgiven. You see, that's the key. Those who are seeking an escape from the things of

this world, from the sin in this world, from the disappointments and imperfections and conflicts of this world will never find it. We can try all sorts of mystical experiences, go into isolation, and get rid of every sinful person and thing from around us, and you know what? We will still not escape! Because we cannot escape our own sin. The sin that is living in us. The sin in our hearts, minds, deeds, and desires that no struggle or effort on our part can ever get rid of. It is not just the people around us who are jars of clay . . . it is not just the people *around* us who are the problem . . . its not just the *others* . . . it is us!

And so what then does Paul say? What does Paul say about us, about us sinful, offensive, jars of clay? He doesn't speak of escape, **but of something much greater**. Rather, into these jars of clay, Paul says, God has placed **a treasure**. The treasure of the Holy Spirit; the treasure of faith; the treasure of **forgiveness**. The treasures and gifts of God given through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These are the treasures we have received in Holy Baptism, and these are the treasures we continue to receive through the preaching of the Word and the reception of the Lord's Supper. These treasures that do not take us from this life, but sustain us through this life. These treasures that do not give us escape, but give us hope and strength. These treasures that are hidden to the world, under a struggling and persecuted Church, but which God gives in abundance here in this same Church. His Church. His Church, which like His Son, lives in the midst of the sin, in the midst of the world, in the midst of hatred and affliction. For if the world took offense at the sinless Son of God made flesh, should we not expect it also to take offense at us and the Church who preach Christ crucified?

And so Paul rightly explains what having this great treasure in jars of clay means for 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 manifested in our bodies."*** Or in other words, having the treasures of the Son of God in jars of clay, the Church is not a place of escape – no, just the opposite! She is life *in the midst* of death. She is forgiveness *in the midst* of sin. She is truth *in the midst* of deception. She is peace *in the midst* of struggle. She is certainty *in the midst* of doubt. She is love *in the midst* of hate. She is hope *in the midst* of hopelessness. She is light *in the midst* of darkness. . . .

And that is the life that Jesus described to His disciples when they were arguing about who was the greatest. As with many things, it turns out that they didn't realize what they were asking for. And in St. Bartholomew's case, it turns out he got what he wanted; he did become the greatest – he became what many consider the greatest *in suffering*. For according to tradition the reward that he received for preaching Christ was that he was skinned alive (which is why the skinning knives are depicted on his shield on the cover of the bulletin), and he was then crucified upside down in agony. . . . Greatness in the

kingdom of God is not measured by worldly standards. In fact, as in Bartholomew's case, and as we see in Christ's cross, it is exactly the opposite of what the world considers great. For as Jesus told His disciples, greatness in the kingdom of God is not about ascending, but about descending: ***“Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as one who serves.”***

And so the Christian life, the life of Christ, is not some dreamy, mystical escape from the problems of this world. No, Christ puts us squarely and firmly in this world, imperfect as we are, jars of clay that we are, that the love, life, and forgiveness that He has given to us may be given through us to others. Not because of who we are, or because of our own power, but because of His power: ***“we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.”*** And as imperfect as we are, and as imperfect as the Church is, this power of God is working – working in our hearts, and in the hearts of many, and giving faith, forgiving sins, and creating children of God. It is, perhaps, a mystery to us, given how we continue to mess things up, and how great saints like Bartholomew are taken from the world. But ***“the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.”*** And He uses that power as He sees fit. We need not worry – it is His Church, and He will take care of it. We are only to remain faithful to the Word, faithful to the use of His means of grace, and faithful in the vocations He has put us in. And He will work through you. And although we jars of clay may never achieve greatness in the eyes of, and by the measure of the world, we will receive, as did St. Bartholomew, a far surpassing and a far greater and lasting reward: a seat around the table of our Saviour in Heaven.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.