

“Vessels of Grace”

#4 in the “Here we GROW” series

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Texts: I Corinthians 4:1 and II Corinthians 4:7

Community Christian Church

Kansas City, Missouri

Sunday, November 7, 2010

8:30 a.m. (Chapel) & 10:45 a.m. (Sanctuary)

Introduction: Incarnation - Here - Earthen Vessels

This morning we begin to focus on the heart of our current “Here We Grow” sermon series, as we seek to understand the unavoidably specific ways grace is made real and how spiritual growth happens.

The theological category we’re diving into is one of those polysyllabic words that can cause some to yawn. But the word has a long and venerated history and is a treasured concept, really, especially at Christmas time. It sounds like a milk-product, and it actually is the “mother’s milk” of any relevant theology worth having. The word is “Incarnation.”

“Incarnation” means “the word became flesh.”¹ Meaning? Meaning... the notion became tangibly real. Meaning... the ephemeral idea became concretely manifested. Meaning ... the flat abstraction became three-dimensional and touchable.

“Incarnation” is what Christianity is all about. My friend Chuck Blaisdell² has often reminded me that while the Easter message of resurrection is the distinguishing crux of the matter for us Christians, there is no resurrection without incarnation.

The “Incarnation” is reinforced by the name the angel quotes from Isaiah’s prophecy when he announces to Joseph what he is to do: “*and you shall name him Emmanuel.*”³ And the meaning of Emmanuel? “God with us.” In other words, “Incarnation.”

This morning I’d like to offer you another word, an equally fine equivalent for “Incarnation.” The word is plain and simple without any fancy ornamentation. Are you ready? Here it is: “Here.”

“Here” is the word. God’s love is here. Grace is here. Not over yonder where you cannot touch it. Not on another planet where you can never visit it. Not at an unattainable elsewhere, but here! Paul put it this way in his first piece of correspondence to the church at Corinth: We are “*servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.*”⁴

We are responsible for bearing the great mysteries of God’s grace and love and hope and peace to the world. Here, among us, is where the gospel gets translated into life.

Here is also where we grow. We grow in the unavoidably particular place called Community Christian Church. Those of you who are members, those of you who are visitors, and those who are trying to figure out whether you want to become members all know this: *Life is lived best in the particular, specific here-and-now.* We grow not in a fantasized, nebulous nether-world but in specific places and with specific people. What was true about Jesus is true also about us: The words of faith – words like compassion, caring, hope, love, justice, mercy, generosity – become flesh (i.e. real) in actual people and places. *Here* we grow! Mary Oliver puts it this way:

*The spirit
likes to dress up like this:*

*ten fingers,
ten toes*

*shoulders, and all the rest...
It could float, of course,
but would rather*

plumb rough matter....

*It needs the body’s world,
instinct*

*and imagination
and the dark hug of time
sweetness
and tangibility*

*to be understood*⁵

The Apostle Paul had another fetching way of putting it: *"For we have this treasure in earthen vessels."*⁶ We live on faith, and we share the grace we have received in and through our fallible selves.

"Earthen vessels" is another way of saying "Here." What did Paul have in mind by this metaphor? I want to suggest three different kinds of "vessels" that bear in them the wondrous grace of God.

I. *Clay Pots*

First, he had in mind the very mortal, imperfect ways he lived out his faith and the equally mortal, imperfect ways we live out our faith. The "earthen vessels" he had in mind were clay jars in the first century after Christ's birth that were used to carry water. They were also used to hold wine, to protect valuables, to serve as repositories for items like treasured scrolls and important implements for worship. Clay jars, Paul was saying, that's what we are. We're simple earthen vessels bearing incredibly valuable treasure within us.

Now clay pots can be fragile and are certainly breakable. Clay pots can crack, as any one of the gardeners among us can testify. What this means for our faith is clear: *"So grand a treasure borne in such a menial, frail, seemingly inept container makes it understandable that the power enabling the whole enterprise is from God and not from us."*⁷

It's important to know that we are "earthen vessels" in this way. Or, to put it like a friend of mine once averred, it's important to know that "we're all cracked pots." If we know we're fallible, if we know we're malleable, if we know we're fragile, we'll be more likely to be appreciative of and reliant upon God's grace as the source of our strength.

The apostle Paul knew intimately and thoroughly that his life was fragile, frail, often impinged upon by hurt and pain and the bruising of the world. Later on in his second letter to the church at Corinth, the apostle Paul describes how he was given *"a thorn in the flesh."* *"Three times I besought the Lord that it should leave me."*⁸ But the answer Paul received about his very earthen thorn-troubled vessel was *"my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*⁹ We are "earthen vessels," clay jars, cracked pots. But we need not fear nor tremble with panic, for God's grace is within us, among us.

II. *The Church as a Vessel of a Ship*

The second kind of vessel that bears the grace of God within it is a ship. The sailing vessel of a ship has long been an image and symbol for the church.

It was natural and appropriate that such a symbol would find a prominent place in the development of the Church since many of the first disciples were fishermen. Some of Jesus' greatest miracles are associated with the Sea of Galilee and boats. And Jesus used the fishing endeavors of the disciples as a powerful metaphor of invitation when he said, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of people."¹⁰

No wonder then that the World Council of Churches has as its symbol the figure of a boat, a sailing vessel, that bears the love and grace of God to a world desperately in need of being visited by both.

We at Community are something of a sailing vessel ourselves. A visitor once described our unique Frank Lloyd Wright building by saying, "You all remind me of 'The Love Boat'." And while he meant it as derision, I think it's really a compliment. For we *are* a "Love Boat" vessel that bears love to the world.

The vessel of Community offers love in so many ways, through many programs, on so many occasions. This "Love Boat," otherwise known as Community Christian Church, has a bow that points into the future, a hull crafted by all the saints of our membership over nearly 120 years of sailing, a map called the Bible for directing our journey on the seas of life, a captain named Jesus who stands on the bridge, and a Steeple of Light that serves as both a mast of mystery and a beacon of beauty and hope for all who behold our efforts.

And here in this "Love Boat" vessel called Community, we are inviting all of our members to respond affirmatively to a clarion call that goes like this: "All hands on deck!!" Every one of us is needed and valuable and prized as part of the "vessel" of Community's "Love Boat." In our current Stewardship Campaign, this means all of our commitments and estimates of giving are absolutely essential for the best fulfillment of our family of faith.

I dabble in some basic math sometimes, and it astonishes me with possibilities. For example, I have wondered lately what would happen for the vessel of Community Christian Church if every member, every household in our congregation were to take the leap of faith and make a financial commitment to Community's crucial and important ministries. Just think of it. What if we each and all could stretch our stewardship to the extent of, at the very least, *simply tithing on*

the 2010 poverty level for a household of one? If all of the households in Community could do that, it would mean the greatest financial support for we've ever known for our congregation's overall programs. Surely we must imagine such a possibility! Surely we must consider growing by such a stretch, such a leap of faith!

The day is coming in the near future when we will need to expand our ministries for our children and youth. In the next few years we will provide congratulatory scholarships for more of our high school seniors than we've ever done in the past. The good news is we have an endowment for that purpose. The challenge will be to nurture and support our children and youth with expanded regular, weekly programs and sufficient staff to meet their needs. Can we do it? Absolutely, if we make the commitment to grow in our stewardship support for the vessel here at Community Christian Church.

III. Vessels of Grace Coursing through the World's Body

The third kind of vessel to which I want to draw your attention has nothing to do with clay jars or boats. Rather, these are the vessels that course through our bodies bearing life-giving sustenance to each and every organ, muscle, and tissue in us.

Blood vessels have become newly important and significant to me over the past 2 ½ months. I now know that there passes through each of us, throughout the 60,000 miles of blood vessels in the average child and the 100,000 miles of blood vessels in the average adult, over the course of our lifetimes nearly a billion barrels of blood. I know that on an average day our blood travels nearly 12,000 miles. I know too that all of that blood coursing through all of our vessels over all of those miles is a very, very good thing! In fact, it's a miraculous thing! And it sure beats the alternative.

What I've begun to see, too, is that our blood vessels are profound metaphors for who we are as Christians and what we are to be as a congregation. We are to understand ourselves as vessels bearing grace and love to the world's body.

The organs and tissues and musculature of the world need us so!! We are to provide the oxygen of openness to the world. We are to give the hemoglobin of hope to the world. We are to offer the electrolytes of love to the world. Sometimes the world is in extra special, extraordinarily desperate straits – such as in the case of natural disasters – and then we are to provide the Lipitor of Love and the Plavix of empowerment to help people hang on and endure! We are called to be vessels bearing grace and love to the world's body.

What an “awesome trust God bestows upon each of us,”¹¹ what a privilege to be the vessels of God’s good news of love. And what wondrous results there are – for the world and for us – when we fulfill our calling as such vessels.

Thanks be to God that we have been granted the opportunity to grow *here* at Community Christian Church, in our cherished family of faith, and to be vessels – clay jars, boats, arteries of affirmation and veins of victory – on behalf of Jesus Christ. AMEN.

NOTES

- 1 John 1:14.
- 2 The Rev. Chuck Blaisdell is senior minister of First Christian Church , Colorado Springs, Colorado.
- 3 Isaiah 7:4; Matthew 1:23.
- 4 I Corinthians 4:1.
- 5 Mary Oliver, “Poem (*The spirit likes to dress up*),” *Dream Work* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986)
- 6 II Corinthians 4:7.
- 7 *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. XI, 2 Corinthians*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), p.81.
- 8 II Corinthians 12:8.
- 9 II Corinthians 12:9.
- 10 Matthew 4:19.
- 11 *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. XI, 2 Cor.*, p. 83.