

Not unto us be glory, Lord, but to your name be praise. Amen.

When we moved here one year, five months and twenty-nine days ago, we put our valuables in cheap containers, because that's what you do when you move. Eve's fancy decorations, wrapped in paper. My theological library, crammed into beer boxes. The Super Nintendo, stuffed in a garbage bag.

The paper, boxes, and bags cost pennies. But the decorations are precious, the books are valuable, and the Super Nintendo is irreplaceable. But that's what you do when you move. The cheap wraps up the precious.

God does something similar to give us a precious, valuable, irreplaceable treasure. God uses jars of clay – cheap, fragile, weak, easily discarded jars – to deliver the Good News that Jesus Christ is Lord. God's Gospel is the precious, valuable, irreplaceable treasure. God's human servants are the cheap, fragile, weak, easily discarded jars of clay.

Today you say goodbye to two particular jars of clay – one a pastor and one a kindergarten teacher. And after one hundred sixty-five years of finding treasure in dozens of different jars of clay, maybe you members of Saint John's are wondering, "Why does God operate this way? Why does he hide such an irreplaceable treasure in such easily replaced vessels?"

I mean, God could use angels to give us his Word, right? He did that at Jesus' birth! Yeah, he did ... and the shepherds were terrified (Luke 2:9). Do you really want to be terrified week in and week out? I'd like to think that I'm not that terrifying, but my children may tell you otherwise. And I'm certainly no angel, just ask Eve.

So why does God do it this way? Well, remember, God does a lot of things that leave you asking why. For example: **We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake (4:5).**

Right away there's a nasty word: *preach*. Why use that word? Nowadays the word *preach* leaves a bad taste in people's mouths, because preaching implies authority.

In Paul's day a preacher was someone whose message had to be obeyed. The preacher didn't make up his own words; he spoke the words of another. He brought news from the king and had to reproduce that news exactly as it was given to him.

God wants modern preachers to do the same thing. Faithful pastors don't make it up. They deliver the message exactly as it has been given in the Bible.

That, by the way, is the defining characteristic of the Augsburg Confession. Our faith is based exactly on what God has said in his Word – not on tradition, not on human reason, not on feeling, emotion, or popular opinion. Like the LORD says through the prophet Jeremiah, "Let the one who has my word speak it faithfully" (Jeremiah 23:28).

This is the Word they speak faithfully: **Jesus Christ is Lord (4:5)**. That's another sign of a faithful pastor. He doesn't preach himself. He preaches Jesus. And that makes sense. If you forget me; no problem. But if you forget Jesus ... ? If you forget the jar of clay, you lose nothing. But if you forget Jesus, you lose everything.

What, after all, are the clay jars? They are **your servants for Jesus' sake (4:5)**. The word *minister* means *servant*. Ministers serve us by preaching and teaching the Word of God, cleansing us with Holy Baptism, and feeding us in Holy Communion. The Augsburg Confession calls Word and sacraments "the tools through which God works" (AC V:1). The purpose of their existence is to shine the spotlight on Jesus.

Because that is where the power is. Listen to this: **For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (4:6).**

Did you notice Paul's power comparison? God saves you in the same way that he creates you – without any help from you. He didn't ask a dark universe to become light; he spoke and made it light. God didn't ask you to make a decision for Jesus, or accept him as your own personal Savior. Because of sin you couldn't do that. Because of sin you were as lifeless and as dark as the dark, dark universe. So God spoke and shined the light of faith in your heart.

That's what he did for Paul. Twenty years before he wrote 2 Corinthians, Paul was "a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man" (1 Timothy 1:13) until a light flashed from heaven, knocked him to the ground, and blinded him (Acts 22:11).

That light came from Jesus, but that light did not save Paul. In fact, all the light did was terrify him. Jesus used a clay jar named Ananias to preach the good news to Paul, to baptize Paul, and to shine the light of faith in Paul's heart (Acts 9:17-18).

Maybe you're thinking, "Dude, it would be so cool if what happened to Paul happened to me, to have a light flash from heaven and have Jesus himself talk to me! Then I would know for sure that Jesus Christ is Lord!"

But don't you see? The best part of what happened to Paul already happened to you, and it happened in the exact same way! God sent a jar of clay to preach the good news to you, to baptize you. And with simple words – "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" – God gave you the light of faith and brought you face to face with Jesus! What a treasure!

But we have this treasure in jars of clay (4:7), and that's the problem. Pottery was common, cheap, and fragile. When it broke you threw it away and got more. No one would ever think to look for precious treasure in a clay jar. So who in their right mind would think to look in a person for the greatest treasure of all? Probably not you or me.

You hear pastor say, "Your sins are forgiven," but you think, "Who does this guy think he is? Only God can forgive sins! Plus, he totally sounds like a broken record; that's all he ever talks about! We've been listening to him for almost two years now; can't he preach about something other than Jesus?" You smash the jar and miss the treasure.

Or, maybe you value the jar more than the treasure. "Have you head Pastor Kuschel preach over there at Elkhorn? Amazing!" "Bro, come on, Pastor Lahmann's church is way bigger." "Yeah, but guys, Pastor Mike is on TV."

What's the difference? We're all clay pots. We don't preach ourselves. Jesus is the priceless, valuable, irreplaceable treasure.

And even he, at first blush, doesn't look it! Jesus is God, but he hides his glory in human flesh. Flesh, so he can live thirty-three years of sin free perfection, and give that perfection to you! Flesh to be pierced, ripped, stabbed and torn apart, flesh to die, so that you never have to worry about being punished for your sins, because he already was. And flesh to be resurrected, so that you are declared not guilty in God's courtroom.

There's a one in a million chance you might find someone willing to die for you (Romans 5:7). But will his death and resurrection declare you not guilty in God's courtroom? Only Jesus can do that.

And God uses humble words from humble men to tell you all about Jesus. You wouldn't think to look for **treasure in a jar of clay**, but that is exactly where God tells you to look.

Which brings us back to our first question: Why? Why does God tell us to look for treasure in jars of clay? Why does God hide such an impressive treasure in such unimpressive vessels? He tells you why: **But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us (4:7)**.

Why? To show that the power is from God and not from us. The glory belongs to God and not to us. God gets all the credit for all the good that comes from preaching. The weaker the vessel, the more God's power stands out.

Today you say goodbye to two of those weak vessels – me and my beautiful and far more useful wife. That goodbye may be sad news, but it is not bad news. God has already given you a new Kindergarten teacher and eventually he will give you another pastor. He will look different, he will sound different, he'll probably like football instead of Nintendo.

But those differences are all superficial. He will contain the same treasure all of your other pastors have because he will preach Jesus Christ as Lord. Remember, the weaker the vessel, the more God's power stands out.

You have the perfect way of remembering that the power comes from God, a visual aid that you see every Sunday: The wall behind this pulpit. Look at it; it's beautiful. It's all about Jesus! No matter who stands in this pulpit, the cross of Christ stands above him.

Christ is here when I preach. He is here when Pastor Lahmann preaches. He was here when Pastor Waldschmidt preached. And when your next pastor comes, Christ will stand behind him too.

All of that is a reminder that the power of preaching does not depend on the man in the pulpit. It depends on God! It's **treasure in a jar of clay**. Amen.