

Sermon – 6-3-2018
Second Sunday after Pentecost – 2 Corinthians 4
By
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As I have mentioned before, the second readings that we have on Sunday mornings, usually from the letters of the New Testament, go through the lectionary more or less in order. If you hear a reading from, say, the early part of Galatians this week, you're probably going to hear a little bit later from Galatians the next week. We're in one of those situations in the early part of this summer, with 2 Corinthians. So I decided that we're going to do a series on those consecutive readings in chapters 4 and 5. These two chapters deal with what life and ministry look like in this world after Christ has ascended to his Father. In other words, what do life and ministry look like right now?

In today's reading from chapter 4, Paul has just declared that he and his fellow workers are very bold when proclaiming the Gospel. When those of us who are of the Scandinavian Lutheran persuasion hear a word like "bold", it can make us kind of shift around in our pews a little bit. Boldness doesn't necessarily fit us. To our disposition, it can seem more like pushiness or aggressiveness, and we don't like that, if it's just out there in the open. We have a tendency to do things like that on a more behind-the-scenes level. We all get bold in one way or another, but Paul's description of his boldness is quite clear: they have renounced secret and shameful ways. He even goes further and talks about the methods that get used: deceiving others or distorting the

Word. Those methods still get used today. Congregations make themselves look like something they're not, preachers make promises they're never going to fulfill, and we all twist God's word in order to make it sound like something more palatable to our itching ears. And that can be a very lucrative business. Just this month, prosperity preacher Jesse Duplantis claimed that God wanted those blessed by his ministry to pay for his fourth private jet, to the tune of \$54 million.

It is those deceptive ways, those distortions of the Word of God, that the evil one uses to blind the minds of unbelievers, as Paul says. Unbelievers look at the prosperity preachers, those who use the Word of God as a club, and those who have slithered into their lives under cover of Christianity, and want nothing to do with it. But Paul's ministry is different, and our ministry should be different. Those who twist the Word and deceive people with it have one thing in common: it ultimately becomes all about them, or in many cases, us. The twisting happens so that the Word can't affect us or accuse us. The deception happens so that we can gather to ourselves our real gods: money, power, fame, people in the seats. But what is the true Gospel ministry? Paul tells us in verse 5: not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and us as your servants.

Because boldness, as Paul talks about it, doesn't involve big flashy signs or making people feel hurt for being hurt's sake, or really much conversation about humans at all, beyond their sin and their need for a savior. Boldness is about

bringing the light into the world. The Word of God that has been given to us shines through us out to this world. This light is for the blessing of the world, not its condemnation. God wants to use his people, whom he has claimed as his children, and whom he loves dearly, to share that love with the world he created, so that others who are lost in their sin and sorrow can be brought to everlasting life and hope through the work of Jesus Christ.

But Paul gives us another reminder in verse 7: Don't look at the tool, look at the work. Paul's "jars of clay" comment gives us good marching orders for our ministry to this world. We don't have to look fancy. We don't have to even have to look like anything. In fact, we shouldn't look like anything. We shouldn't look like the world. We shouldn't look like good, nice Christians. We should just look like people, of all ages, colors, and experiences, all sharing the same love of God. We are to be the plain, nondescript water bottle that you bring to the concert that has something a lot different than water inside. And we are called to be even more different than that. Paul describes what his jar, his water bottle, looks like, and it doesn't sound very good to our ears: hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted, struck down. That's less a water bottle, and more like a rusted out tin can. That is the effect of sharing the life that has been given to us, that our life seems to the outside world to become less and less. But when the life of God, found in the death of Christ, is given from us, he sustains us, and will give us a new body.

One of my former pastors served at a large congregation in Sioux Falls, SD. They were undergoing a \$2 million renovation project. As he was looking over the progress with a council member, the member remarked, "It's too bad we're going to have to replace all this carpet and furnishings and stuff in 20 years anyway." The pastor responded in a way that reflects pouring out ourselves for the sake of those who need to hear. He responded, "I hope so. That will mean that we have used this place, that we have done ministry here, that we have shared the Word of life here. We build places like this to use them up." And we have been built, as the church, to be used up, for the sake of those who do not know Christ. As Nicolas Zinzendorf, one of the leaders of the Moravian movement, once said, "Preach the Gospel. Die. Be forgotten."

In a small way, we are doing the work of Christ in this world. In verse 12, Paul says "death is at work in us, but life is at work in you." The only way that we can have the strength to lay down our lives so that others may live, is by having our lives sustained by one laying down his life for us. And his life can sustain not just ours, but the lives of all of those who call on his name. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is a well that never goes dry, and a tower that never falls. He takes your sins, and replaces them with his eternal life. And that life overflows from you to others, no matter how your rusty tin can looks or feels. God uses every tool to proclaim his son, including you, and we will not be destroyed, but we will see him face to face. AMEN.