

Getting Smashed for Jesus – July 20, 2014  
By Wayne J. Schneider – Soli Deo Gloria

Getting Smashed for Jesus  
Isaiah 45:8-9 & Jeremiah 18:1-6

Have you ever had a good idea, and then looked for a good biblical text to fund it? Well, you are probably not the last person who will do that. And you are certainly not the first to do it. Consider St. Paul. He wanted to write his vexed church in Corinth. He saw that they had confused major matters and minor items, majoring in minor stuff to the neglect of major stuff. They were preoccupied with class distinctions, differences between Jewish and Gentile folk, arguments about circumcision, and right food, insiders and outsiders, even some lawsuits, all the usual stuff that makes for church quarrels. St. Paul wants to call them out. But you could not just do that, especially from a remote distance by a letter.

He had to find a biblical text. You can picture him leafing through the book of Jeremiah, one of his favorites, looking for a good text that would support his good idea. And he found it! In Jeremiah 18! That prophet had discovered a perfect “sermon illustration” by a visit to a local potter.

So Jeremiah goes on and on about the potter being God and Israel being the clay. He saw that if the clay pleased the potter, the potter would value and keep the pot that the clay had become. But if the clay was resistant to right shaping, the potter would smash the clay and start again to get it right. The “performance” of the clay would determine the way of the potter with the clay. Jeremiah used the imagery to comment on the coming smashing of Jerusalem, smashed clay that had displeased the potter for much too long.

And then, just to be sure he had enough material to work with, St. Paul flipped back to the book of Isaiah. He came to chapter 45. That old prophet had just told the exiled Jews that they would be saved by a *goi*, by the Gentle, Cyrus the Persian. This was God’s new way to save God’s chosen people. Apparently some of the Jews said, “*No, we will not be saved by a goi. We refuse that rescue and will wait for a good Jewish Messiah.*” Isaiah responds to that refusal with the same imagery of clay and potter:

Woe...big trouble coming...

Woe to you who refuse the way of God,

Who strive with your maker.

Woe to the clay that disputes the potter.

Does the clay say to the potter, "*What are you doing?*"

Does the clay say to the potter, "*You forgot the handles?*"

No, the clay just turns compliantly in the hands of the potter, yielding to the artistry of the potter.

St. Paul got these two texts on clay and potter from Jeremiah and Isaiah. He got them on Monday. By Wednesday he thought they would work. But then he realized he had to work some to make them work. Like preachers do with texts, he had to jiggle them a little. Because the problem in Corinth was not disobedience to God as with Jeremiah's folk in Jerusalem under threat, or resistance as with Isaiah's folk in exile. The problem was majoring minor stuff and neglecting major stuff.

So Paul "adjusts" the text. He makes the issue not clay and potter. That would be too obvious. He makes it *clay pot* and the *contents of the clay pot*. Neither Jeremiah nor Isaiah had thought to comment on the contents of the clay pot. But that just shows what holy imagination can do. St. Paul has ample imagination and lots of *chutzpah*, the kind required to do a good sermon. He extends the imagery beyond his text.

We have this treasure in clay jars.

We have *the container* and *the stuff contained*. And we have confused them! We think the clay pot is the real thing and have neglected the stuff inside. And when we do that, being the clay pot, we think that we are the treasure. We might, in a moment of great eloquence, even dare to think that the "extraordinary power" belongs to us.

We might think that the church, the clay pot that holds the treasure of the gospel, is a big deal. We might think that all the little stuff that so preoccupies us and uses up our energy is more crucial than the stuff inside the jar. We might! And then we would be like Corinth!

So if Paul can imagine out from Jeremiah and Isaiah, you will not mind of I imagine out from St. Paul. The treasure is the news of the gospel, the news of God enacted in Jesus Christ, the one who reconciles us and liberates us to new life. This God shows up with what we most desperately must have to live an abundant life. The treasure is:

-*forgiveness* in order to start again in a society that never forgives and keeps score forever;

-*generosity* that overwhelms our lack in a society based in scarcity and getting more for ourselves;

-*hospitality* that welcomes us in a society that is inhospitable to all but our own kind;  
-*justice* that protects the vulnerable in a social system that is deathly in its injustice.

It is the old, old story of God's self-giving graciousness to us and to all creatures. That is the treasure!

Everything else is a clay pot that is designed to hold and transmit and enact the treasure. Everything else!...the church and its ministers, its hymnals and catechisms, its budgets and programs, its mission boards, its conference offices, its congregations, its church bells and bulletins and candles and music programs, its youth groups and mission trips and church camps, its mission festivals and quarrels and acts of mercy. Everything else is a clay pot...fragile, likely to break, never fully able to contain the truth and richness of the treasure.

In the text, St. Paul writes to a church that is afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down. That is a standard position for the faithful church; no surprise there! We now know about being afflicted, perplexed and even struck down, though mostly we are not faithful enough to be persecuted. We all know now that the church is in big trouble. Everyone knows that. Bishop Hagiya says that he will only ordain folk to the ministry of Word and Sacrament who are theologically grounded, and have enough of an entrepreneurial capacity to do something new, missional, and generative. It is a new day that evokes new responses.

The temptation for the church—when it is afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down—is to give in to being crushed, driven to despair, forsaken, and destroyed. It is enough to push us over the edge, to despair of the future. But we make this move,

From afflicted to crushed,

From perplexed to despair,

From persecuted to forsaken,

From struck down to destroyed...

we make this move only when we give too much credence to the clay pot and confuse the clay pot with the treasure. It is easy enough, when you are a pastor or a responsible lay person, to worry excessively about the clay pot of the church, whether we will have enough dollars, enough members—to keep it all going.

But we know, when we think carefully, that the church is not the treasure. The church is

a fragile, transitory vehicle for the gospel, not more. Nobody thought, did they, that our old hymnals would last forever? Nobody thought, did they, that our preferred liturgy or catechism or organizational chart would persist in eternity? Nobody thought, did they, that any form of the church would last on and on and on?

Because clay pots are fragile, transitory, and passing. So the church, with its vested interests and greed and anxiety and foolish judgments and ideological silliness, is not durable in any form or manifestation, not even the ones we most value.

But St. Paul says the treasure prevents us from taking the vessels with ultimate seriousness. It is the treasure of the gospel, the news of reconciliation and emancipation, that is the abiding reality that does not fail. It is the treasure that draws the line against our over-investment in clay pots. It is the truth of the gospel that permits us to live freely in this vexed context,

afflicted **but not** crushed,  
perplexed **but not** driven to despair,  
persecuted **but not** forsaken,  
struck down **but not** destroyed.

It is the treasure that lets us see clearly and love dearly and follow nearly. It is this “**But not**” that matters. When we fall into despair and panic cynicism and romanticism, it is because we have confused the treasure with the clay pots, when we regard our capacity to make it work as a life or death matter. We have been seduced by a “can-do” American consumerism, or by works righteousness to bet inordinately on our work and our imagination and our skill and our wealth. And none of it will abide.

To be sure that we do not confuse the treasure with the vessels,

To be sure that we do not take the vessels too seriously,

To be sure that we recognize that the extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us!

“Extraordinary power” concerns self-giving forgiveness, hospitality, and generosity. “Transcendent power” does not come from good management or good planning or good scholarship, but from vulnerable self-giving.

Our moment of crisis in the church is a moment to consider among us *the richness of the treasure* and *the fragility of the vessel* in the presence of the treasure. It may be a moment

to decide yet again to give ourselves over to the truth of the treasure, and let God manage much of the rest for the sake of the vessel.

I have in mind vexed church treasurers, exhausted pastors, and worried church leaders. I have in mind all of us who have taken on the burden of the church, the cost of discipleship as it takes church form. I have in mind that we pause to recognize that more is going on than us, that in, with, and under us and our efforts is this buoyant fidelity that abides and sustains, no matter what. I have in mind that we not be talked out of the truth of the gospel that is the only warrant for the vessels we so value.

We are watching while the clay pots are being smashed like Jeremiah imagined old Jerusalem to be smashed, smashed maybe for being disobedient and irrelevant, smashed for being too-self-preoccupied, smashed for being too comfortable with privilege and national ideology and middle class morality. So I had the thought, the clay pots are being smashed for the sake of Jesus, that the power of Jesus in his generosity, forgiveness, hospitality, and justice can break loose in the world to make for healing and newness.

St. Paul writes this fourth chapter around the gospel of Friday and Sunday. He writes that we carry "*in the body the death of Jesus.*" We are marked by vulnerability, exposed for the sake of the gospel. We are always being given up to death for the sake of Jesus, always having life sucked out of us because we have embraced the gospel. But then he asserts, that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence (v. 14).

A visit to the potter's house permits the prophet to ponder that the potter can *make* and *unmake* and *remake* the pot. And he sees that in exile, in its time of displacement, Israel is being *unmade* and *remade* in a new form according to God's purpose. Israel will and must become who it was not for the sake of God's intention. No, the clay does not get to question the potter. For Paul this same imagery from the prophets pertains to the church. God is the same potter. We have this clay pot of church life. We like clay pots a certain way. We like the handle and the design and the color the way we like them. We like worship to be a certain way and music to be a certain way and mission to be done in a certain way, etc. etc. etc.

And then we have this moment of stunning attentiveness. The pot is being reshaped before our very eyes because it no longer pleases the potter. Some folk do not like the change and its new requirements. Well, none of us like it very much. We want to resist the potter and have it the way we want it. But that is to confuse the treasure with the vessel.

So my word to you—as a white, retired male who has no risks to run—is to care more for the treasure. Because this is the truth about the treasure: there is not any single person—not old or young, not rich or poor, not gay or straight, not conservative or liberal—not anyone who does not eagerly hope for the news of God’s reconciling, liberating love. Not one! The treasure must be enacted in new forms. It must take many new forms. But the forms, those we prefer and those forms that we resist, are not the treasure.

The right vessels will be given in due course. The treasure provides that for us, and for many others through us. St. Paul writes at the end of his clay pot paragraph: “*We do not lose heart!*” We lose heart only when we value the clay pots excessively. But we do not lose heart...We do not! Because of the treasure! Alleluia. Amen.