

Earthen Vessels 2 Corinthians 4:7-11

There was once a young woman who, upon her father's death, inherited the contents of his famed wine cellar. In it, there were bottles of many famous vintages, stored carefully away to be served only on the most special occasions. The woman had never spent much time down in the cellar, because it had been her father's own delight to descend into its darkness in order to select the perfect wine for every festive occasion.

But when the cellar became her inheritance, the woman knew that it was time for her to make an inventory of all she owned. She clambered down the wooden staircase that led into the cellar, and began examining the rows of dust-covered bottles with their famous but fading labels. In a far corner, she noticed a single shelf with one earthen crock standing upon it. As she made her way through cobwebs and wine racks to the corner shelf, she noticed that a label in her father's spidery handwriting had been affixed to the outside of the pottery vessel. Moving closer and stooping to read it, she made out the faint words, "Precious Beyond All Price."

The young woman was curious about what such a label could mean. Surely all the other bottles of the cellar were valuable – yet each of them had its price, however costly. A wine beyond pricing: now that was surely a curiosity – a precious commodity indeed! The woman was puzzled.

But the demands of settling her father's estate consumed her, and she all but forgot the lone earthen crock standing on the shelf in the cellar corner.

Then it came to pass that the young woman fell in love as the season of Christmas was approaching. While pondering what she might offer her beloved that would be a truly precious and wonderful gift, she remembered the vessel in the cellar. There, truly, she thought to herself, would be a gift worth giving. After all, her father's label described it as precious beyond all pricing. Still, the crock was so old, so crude in appearance, and such an awkward shape.

The woman began to search high and low in all the shops of the city until she found a crystal decanter of extraordinary beauty. This, she thought to herself as she made the purchase, is a fitting container for a wine of such rare vintage. Pleased with her find, she took the decanter with her and descended into the cellar. She felt herself filling with excitement and the holiday spirit as she crept to the dusty corner and removed the crockery vessel. As she unsealed its lid, she knew her father's words on the label must be true – for a bouquet of extraordinary loveliness filled the dank air of the cellar around her.

Setting the crystal decanter carefully onto a table, she lifted the crock and began to pour. A ruby liquid emerged from the mouth of the crock and trickled down the sides of the decanter, glinting with sparkles of light as if from an inner radiance – for the cellar itself was but dimly-lit and musty. As the level of the liquid rose higher in the decanter, the woman's anticipatory satisfaction swelled.

Then, with a sudden CRACK! the crystal shattered. The precious wine spilled out over the table and onto the floor, seeping slowly into the ground beneath. Too late, the young woman realized the truth: that only the earthen vessel could contain it.

How shall we understand this? Let me begin in a roundabout way. There was a question which fascinated theologians in the Middle Ages. “Does God become incarnate (in human flesh and bone) among the poor, fallen creatures because that is what God is stuck with, for lack of anything finer, or does God take on our creatureliness just as it is, because in God's eyes it is precious in its own fashion?” In the language of the parable, if God could have poured Godself into a crystal decanter, would God have preferred the more elegant vessel? Or does God harbor a curious fondness for earthen vessels – crude appearances, awkward shapes and all?

I confess I think God chooses the earthen vessels in all our earthiness – our reality as creatures molded out of dust and the breath of God. I think this fondness that

God has for earthen vessels says something very important to us about the virtue of our imperfection.

As human beings, as creatures of earth, every single one of us is imperfect in a number of significant ways. This imperfection often masks itself in the modern world in the form of addictive behaviors. Every one of us, it seems to me, is enslaved by some addiction – whether to sugar, alcohol, nicotine, or to something more subtle like an inability to say “No” to any request; an inability to meet deadlines; an inability to trust other human beings in relationships; an inability to let go of fear and anxiety and trust ourselves.

Addictive behaviors mark us as imperfect, and yet many of them also emerge out of our willful efforts to deny our imperfection, recreating ourselves after our own image of perfection: we yearn to be thinner, smarter, more successful, more “in control.” The strange antidote to addictive behaviors, therefore, becomes the willingness to embrace our imperfection, letting God shape us after God’s image of what is right and desirable for our nature, rather than being so intent on reshaping ourselves.

This may sound like an easy remedy, but it is actually one of the most difficult spiritual challenges that any of us can undertake. It is so hard to make ourselves stop striving in order simply to be. It is so hard to stand back from the busy-ness and the distractions which pull at us, long enough to know that God is God; long enough to hear the voice of stillness within us.

The good news is this: that from all eternity, God has harbored a peculiar fondness for earthen vessels. From all eternity, God has felt an overflowing passion for human creatures, molded out of dust and the breath of the divine. Curious as it may sound, then, there is a virtue to our imperfection, because it is only when we stop our efforts to be mini-gods of our own self-styled perfections – attractiveness, achievement, popularity, success – that we can let God become the sole God of our being. It is only when we let ourselves be empty that we can be made full.

So as Paul wrote in his second letter to the church at Corinth: “We have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.” God alone is Creator. God alone is the sovereign sustainer and redeemer of our lives. Yet this very God, transcendent in power – this “God who spins the whirling planets,” this “Love that moves the sun and other stars” – this is the God who found human being-ness, in all its awkwardness and imperfections, to be the most precious vessel of all into which to pour God’s Spirit. This is the God who chose to hallow the flesh, *our* flesh, through the miracle of incarnation. When we can finally let go of our addictive striving to make ourselves perfect after our own image, we realize that only the wine of God’s holy indwelling can ultimately quench our thirst. Poured deliberately and lovingly into the earthen vessel of our human lives, *this* is a wine which is precious beyond all price, indeed.

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Parable by Jack S. Boozer, told by Mary Louise Bingle.