

# Holy Trinity Lutheran Church Des Moines, WA

June 10, 2012

2 Corinthians 4:7-12

Treasure in Jars of Clay

Hymns: 570 - 560 - 621 Closing: 765

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

My recent trip to Wisconsin was filled with a great privilege. During my vacation, I had the opportunity to golf at a place called Erin Hills, an unbelievable course that will host the US Open in a few years. It was a tremendous experience, but that was far from being the great privilege of my trip. I met up with a group of my close friends, seeing a few of them for the first time since we graduated from Seminary two years ago. It was quite a different scene than when we parted, as all of us now had at least one kid added to the mix. Yet, that also was not the privilege of which I speak. I gathered with the entire Voss clan, my grandparents, parents, brothers and sisters, all of us together for the first time in 2 ½ years. Despite that being a great blessing, it is not what I'm referring to. What could I be talking about if it is not any of those great blessings? Here is the privilege that I had: I saw jars of clay.

I was privileged to see jars of clay like the ones that the Apostle Paul described in the great words of 2 Corinthians 4:7-12 ***But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.*** On May 24 at our Wisconsin Synod Seminary's Call Day, I saw 43 jars

of clay sent out into the world as they were assigned to serve as Ministers of the Gospel at various congregations in various places all over the country that all had one thing in common: They were in need of shepherding pastors. On May 26, at one of our Synod's two ministry preparation high schools, I saw 48 young jars of clay graduate in a class of 84 at Luther Prep School, 48 young 18 year olds who would be moving on to continue their training as pastors and teachers at Martin Luther College. In two days, I was privileged to see 91 of God's jars of clay. What a tremendous blessing it was for me! This *Walking Together* Sunday is meant to lead all of us to see what a truly amazing gift we have been given in the WELS. One of those blessing is seen in the incredible impact that the ministerial training schools (Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Luther Prep School, Martin Luther College, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary) have on our Synod. Through the work of those schools, God has and he continues to bring the treasure of his Gospel in jars of clay! That statement is made all the more amazing as we consider what these jars of clay were by nature, and as we look at what they are by God's grace.

What I have in my hands can most bluntly be described as a jar of clay. If I dropped it on the ground, it would shatter into pieces. If I left it out in the elements, it would weather and grow brittle. If I applied enough pressure, it would crack and crumble. And what is true of this jar of clay is true of every jar of clay. By nature, a jar of clay is frail and fragile. It can be broken. It can easily become chipped and damaged. It can have glaring imperfections.

With that in mind, how fitting it is that Paul refers to those who serve as ministers of the Gospel as jars of clay. Every pastor that has ever served you with the Gospel, every teacher that has ever instructed you in the truths of the Word, every one of the hundreds of pastors and teachers who is being trained at our Synod's ministry training schools is by nature very much like a jar of clay. By nature (their sinful nature), they are frail and fragile. They are people who are made ugly by the marks of sin. They can be damaged and chipped as they go through life. They can often have glaring imperfections. And that makes them easy targets for Satan as he seeks to destroy the treasure of the Gospel message. Satan does all he can to break these jars of clay. He uses self-doubts and personal

failings. He uses lukewarm and divisive members. He uses an intolerant and hateful world. Through any means possible, Satan applies pressure to these frail and fragile jars of clay, chipping away at them, hoping to break them apart. He seeks to destroy the ministry of the Gospel by attacking the people who bring it to the world.

But despite a jar of clay being frail and fragile, they often become much more. The artist who started to mold this piece of clay knew what they were working with. She knew that one wrong movement of the hand on the pottery wheel could ruin all the work. She knew that a slippery grasp could shatter all that she was doing. Yet, despite knowing that she was working with something frail and fragile, she invested a tremendous amount of time and energy to turn what was once a lump of clay into a beautiful work of art that proclaims a beautiful message.

So it is with the jars of clay that Paul describes. Although the men and women that God uses to preach and teach in his church are by nature frail and fragile jars of clay, God still chooses to take the time to shape and form them into beautiful vessels. He does that first by taking away the sins that make them so weak and which mark them in such ugly ways. He does that in the same way that he does it for each and every person in this world. He makes them perfect through the purifying work of his Son, Jesus Christ.

He also shapes these jars of clay in amazing and unique ways. He provides them with incredible and wide-ranging talents and gifts. He works in them dedication and resolve. He gives them unique personalities and varying interests. Each and every jar of clay that God uses to bring the treasure of the Gospel is carefully crafted by God himself. Not one of them is the same, they all have varying amounts of gifts, yet every one of them is a work of God's hands.

And through the effort of our Synod's worker training schools, those jars of clay that God gives to his church continue to be crafted and shaped and strengthened. For many, that intensive shaping begins at age 14, at our Synod Prep schools which operate to prepare and encourage young ministers. It continues at Martin Luther College, where every single one of our Synod's pastors and teachers is trained and developed. For pastors, it moves to

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. In each of those schools, the students are not just shaped in the classroom, they are molded in the world as they get to go out with current pastors and teachers to live and learn in unique ways. Our Synod often uses 12 years to shape and mold what has been given to them by God.

And what is shaped in those worker training schools is fortified out in the world. Just as this jar of clay went through the fire to make it strong to last, those who are called to serve in the public ministry are strengthened by fire. The challenges and experiences that each pastor and teacher faces in his ministry is a way in which God bakes a product that will be strong and lasting.

Through this lengthy process of shaping and strengthening, jars of clay are made ready to go and serve God and his people. That is what was so wonderful about what I was privileged to see two weeks ago at those two events I attended. It is impossible for those 48 graduates from Luther Prep to know the ways and the places in which they will one day serve their God and his church, yet I could look at them, my sister included, and know that God was getting them ready. I know that, because at the Seminary, I got to listen as, in an instant, men and their families learned the ways and places to which God had called them.

As I sat in those two ceremonies two weeks ago, I found it amazing how perspective had changed my view of what was happening. When I personally went through those experiences years ago, so much was unknown. After serving for two years in very real ways and in a very real place, it was easier to reflect on the many ways that God worked to shape and form me as I went through the terrific schools that our Synod has established for the express purpose of training pastors and teachers.

And you were a part of that. Our relationship didn't just start two years ago when, sitting hand in hand with my wife, we heard, "Thomas Voss, Associate Pastor, Holy Trinity, Des Moines, WA." It started years earlier when you, as a church in the Wisconsin Synod, made it possible for me to be shaped and molded at Luther Prep School, and Martin Luther College, and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. The offerings that you give today don't just go to keeping the lights on and water running. They are working to shape the pastor who will someday bring

you the comfort of life eternal in your last days. They are going to mold the teacher who will someday instruct your children and grandchildren in the truths of the Word. They are serving to strengthen the willing and ready servants who will take the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

As one of the jars of clay who has been called to guard the treasure of the Gospel here at Holy Trinity, a jar of clay who knows just how weak and fragile and imperfect we can be, I ask you to keep all of the pastors and teachers here at Holy Trinity in your prayers, and I encourage you to support the schools which train new jars of clay. What a blessing it is to have this treasure! What a blessing it is to have these jars of clay! What a privilege it is to be a part of shaping and forming them for the spread of God's kingdom!