

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Clay Jars: Mission of Mercy”

Dr. Jay Howell

2 Corinthians 5:18-6:10

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Today we continue in this look at some missional words from the Apostle Paul in the letter of 2 Corinthians. In this section of the letter, Paul goes into the how and the why of the mission of God and, as we’ll see maybe most directly today, the mission of the church too.

As we’ve moved forward, Paul begins to speak of the new work God is doing in Christ. It happens within us, this renewal by the Spirit, and then we start to put on new lenses, seeing the world and everyone in it potentially as more instances in which that renewing work could happen. We heard that in our memory verse for the month, which I would encourage everyone to say with me again if you turned to the back cover of the bulletin. 2 Corinthians 5:17: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

Today we pick up right after that, and these are some of those verses that if you were to pick one spot from which to imagine the scope and shape of the church’s mission and ministry, this wouldn’t be the worst place to start. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God. For our sake God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As we work together with him, we entreat you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”

Look, now is the acceptable time; look, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: in great endurance, afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; in purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors and yet are true, as unknown and yet are well known, as dying and look—we are alive, as punished and yet not killed, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing and yet possessing everything.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God of Mercy, in your Son you have redeemed us and reconciled us. We pray that by your Word you would guide us to hold that mercy in our hearts, that in our conduct throughout our lives, we might reflect the great victory of grace over malice. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Potholes. You know potholes, right? There are probably a few you're so used to avoiding on your regular routes that you don't even think about it.

A few different ways that potholes are fixed. You may not have been aware of these methods, but I bet you can tell the difference.

The first one's called throw and roll. Pretty straightforward. A crew fills the pothole with asphalt, then a compactor or a roller comes and smooths it out. Downside is it doesn't last long. (I'm not knocking that, by the way. At some point, even a very temporary solution is better than an axle-breaking hole in the ground. It just doesn't last long.)

The next one is known as mill patching. You mill the top two inches of the pavement up around the pothole, then you put asphalt in the space remaining. So, a little more involved, but it lasts a bit longer.

A third one—and I'm sure there are more—is called dig in patching. With this one, an entire 6x6 square of pavement is removed and replaced. Sometimes they even use this infrared tool that heats up and rejuvenates the asphalt around it so that you can meld in the new asphalt in with the road. This of course takes longer, but it lasts a lot longer too, closer to having a new road altogether.

Now while we're all thinking of our favorite potholes, I think Paul has something to offer us in the way of pothole repair.

Paul writes, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us."

Paul is introducing another layer of imagery. In previous weeks he's used "clay jars," or a "tent" or "clothing," here he introduces the notion of reconciliation. You probably heard that word a few times. All this imagery is just different language to describe the same amazing promise: the power of the grace of God in Christ Jesus and how it sends us out.

First, it's not of ourselves: "All of this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ." "That is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." God is the starting point, and this reconciling work is Christ's death on the cross,

the forgiveness of sins, the renewing of the world. Even just that word “reconcile” here literally means “to change” or “to change throughout.”

So if we’re talking about fixing potholes here, this isn’t the quick throw and roll. It’s that full on infrared rejuvenation and melding things together.

But then another amazing thing happens. Paul tells us a few different ways. In v. 18, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, *and has given us the ministry of reconciliation,*” and then in the next verse, “that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, *and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.*” And then in v. 20, “So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.” Did you hear the movement here? It’s not just that God is doing this amazing, renewing, reconciling work in the world. It’s that same mission being entrusted to God’s people, to the church. “He has given us the ministry of reconciliation.”

It’d be as if on the street by your home, there was a big giant pothole, and you’ve busted up your car in it so bad you can’t recognize it. But a crew comes along, and they’ve got all the best stuff. They’re taking up a big patch. They’ve got the infrared thing out there. And when they’re done you can barely tell that there was ever a hole in the road to begin with, because everything has been changed throughout. And you’re there watching, and you think, “Hey, that’s pretty great. A new road.”

And then the head of the crew looks up and says, “Hey, so we’re heading up the road to fix these other potholes, but I want you to come do it. I’ll be with you, but I want you to come do it.”

And you’re first thought is, “Who, me?” And the crew boss says, “Yeah, you.”

That’s the work of the church. This ministry of reconciliation.

Now the methods of it? Well, they’re not so much mechanized as fixing potholes, but Paul goes into that too. That’s what some of those following verses are about, “through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships,” “by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God.” “We are treated as impostors, and yet are true.” All that’s another way of saying, “We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”

But the fact that in this amazing work that God is doing, he then turns to us and says, “Hey, I want you to come do it,” does that make anyone a bit nervous? It should. We’re charged with this mission of reconciliation, of healing, of mercy, not just, “Hey, be nice to people because Jesus died for you,” but, “because of the amazing, creation-altering work accomplished on the cross and out of the empty tomb, you, yes I mean you, are entrusted with sharing in and furthering that same healing.”

As I mentioned earlier, today is the Commitment Sunday in our annual Stewardship Campaign, and our focus in this campaign has been “foundations,” that is, the foundations of our calling as a church, recognizing a) that we’re stepping out into this big thing with updates to the building and engagement in our community and b) that if in doing so, we neglect the foundations of our calling as a church, and that could be spiritual neglect and/or practical or financial neglect, then we’ve missed something about our purpose as a church.

Now all of the following comes with a caveat—and I say this every year. If I were in your shoes, and some preacher came and gave the Stewardship talk, there’d be a part of me that would think, “Yeah, you’re just trying to pad the church budget.” If that’s where you are, let’s talk some more, because I am convinced that a life of generosity in response to the grace of God can be transformative in ways we can’t begin to fathom. But the short version of what I’d tell you is this, “If the only thing holding you back from embracing a deeper generosity is skepticism about me and my motives—and be honest with yourself, is that the only thing or is that just the excuse—but if truly that’s the only thing holding you back, then my challenge to you is to double what you typically dedicate to God in a given year and don’t give it to this church. Give it to some other ministry. And then let’s talk in a year.” I am so convinced that God will use that to change your heart that I’d rather you not give to this church at all.

But if you sense that calling, that pull toward generosity, this mission of reconciliation, of mercy, of healing in the name of Christ should infuse every aspect of what we do. Yes, when we talk about budgets, we’re talking about things like light bills and upkeep. We’re talking about allocating resources over here or over there. We’re talking about how we support youth ministry, children’s ministry, guest speakers, fellowship events, retreats, local mission partners, missionaries abroad. And all of that is important, even the seemingly menial things like, “How much should we budget for copy paper?”

But all of it is in service to this mission to reconcile, to heal, that we have been charged with in the name of Christ. And if we lose sight of that, then this is just a big waste of time.

Even this big building thing we’re doing, with construction starting in a few weeks, it’s exciting, and it’s been inspiring to see how we as a church have rallied around this effort together. But if we lose sight of this mission to reconcile, to heal in the name of Christ, then that will have been a big waste of time too.

As Paul puts it in chapter six, “As we work together with God, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.”

So I want you to imagine, even now, even as you may have already considered how God is leading you in generosity in the coming year, imagine each set of hands, each word or act

shared, each commitment offered not as a way that we, you know, support a good cause but more amazingly, each as a small way that we work together with God in bringing about this great healing that he is doing in Christ.

Some may be aware of an old band that was most active in the 60s and 70s called simply The Band. Songs like “Up on Cripple Creek,” “The Weight,” those guys. Well one member of The Band was named Garth Hudson. He was a multi-instrumentalist, probably the most talented and best trained out of the whole group. And even when he joined The Band, he insisted that the rest of the group pay him \$10 a week so he could with integrity tell his family that he was the music teacher, rather than that he just joined a rock and roll band.

But in an interview, he shared about his background as a jazz musician, saying, “There is a view that jazz is evil, because it comes from evil people. But actually, the greatest priests on 52nd Street and on the streets of New York City were the musicians. They were doing the greatest healing work.”

This isn’t to comment on jazz or music or whether healing can come about through other means. I believe God can and does use no shortage of means to bring about this great work of renewal, but that’s a sermon for another day.

What stuck with me from that quick interview was the somewhat tragic and sad view that “the greatest priests” were in these jazz clubs. That’s just one person’s voice, but I suspect there’s more than one that has felt this way. That is to say, by implication, the church wasn’t seen as a place of mercy, as a place of healing within a broken world. And that should be heartbreaking for us to hear. I mean, yeah I know we here right now had little to do with the ministry in the streets of New York City fifty years ago, but do you think that still happens? Do you think the church of Christ and those who follow him are sometimes seen as, well, less than a place of healing?

One thing’s for sure: the world is yearning for it. Can you imagine in your own life, in your family, in your work, in our community, in our country, any instances in which a work of healing might be needed? I don’t think any of us have to think long about that.

And how heartbreaking would it be if in a given place, the people lift their heads up and see a steeple or see a cross and think, “Eh, that’s not a house of healing there. That’s not a place of peace”?

But then imagine what amazing things, what acts of mercy, what hands of healing, what renewal, what reconciliation God has done when a ragtag group of people, all commissioned into patching potholes, this assembly known as the church hear the call, step up, and come together.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.