

“Messy On The Outside”
Acts 9:1-18; I Corinthians 4:5-18
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This isn't the first time I've preached here at Richmond Presbyterian church. Way back in 2009, when I was still a seminary student at VST, I served for one year as the interim director for Camp Douglas, this Presbytery's summer camp up on the Sunshine Coast. And part of my job that year was to visit as many churches as I could and share the story of what God was doing up at Camp Douglas – and the first church I went to that summer was right here. The sanctuary was a little different back then, but then, so was I – a lot more hair.

Visiting all those different churches that summer was a lot of fun, partly because I only had to write one sermon, and I could preach it over and over again at every congregation; and after each Sunday, I would make a few little changes to the sermon – if one of my jokes didn't get any laughs, I'd tweak it a bit and try again, or if I kept stumbling over my words in the same place, I knew I had to rearrange things – so every week, the sermon got better and better with all these little changes. The only problem with this was that on that first Sunday, I printed off my sermon notes to bring here to Richmond, and as soon as it printed, my computer

died, never to start again – which meant that that one copy of the sermon was the only copy I had, the only copy I would ever have.

So over the course of the summer, while the sermon itself got better and better, the notes were looking worse and worse with every passing week: rumpled and crumpled, torn edges fixed with scotch tape, stained with coffee and tea and triple-O sauce from the burgers on BC Ferries, and all these notes and arrows scribbled all over the margins.

As the summer went on my beat-up old manuscript got messier and messier, but in the end, the notes really didn't matter – I preached that sermon so many times, I had it memorized. The notes got worse and worse, but the story got better and better.

And thinking about that summer, that sermon, that first visit here to Richmond all those years ago, it got me thinking about the Apostle Paul. In the first passage we read this morning from the book of Acts, we meet Paul as a young, up-and-coming go-getter. He's a rising star on the Jerusalem council, he gets invited to dinner parties at the high priest's house, he's got a corner office in the temple complex with lovely views overlooking the Kidron Valley. Paul has taken on the challenge of crushing this new upstart Jesus movement with the full

force of the law, and there's no doubt in anyone's mind that if anyone can get the job done, it's the wunderkind from Tarsus.

Paul is going places. And the first place he's going is Damascus – he's successfully chased the Jesus followers out of Jerusalem, so now he's taking the show on the road, expanding his campaign, and his own public profile, out from Jerusalem into the world around. As he rides out of Jerusalem that day, Paul is at the absolute pinnacle of his worldly success – he is admired, respected, wealthy, successful, full of energy and vitality, full head of hair, perfect teeth, Paul has got it all.

And now, let's fast forward, say, twenty years ahead, to the Paul writing the words we read in his second letter to the church in Corinth. Because in the eyes of the world, this Paul is not a success. This Paul is a disaster. He's been in and out of jails and prisons all across the Roman Empire. He's been assaulted, attacked, almost murdered, barely escaping death and dismemberment from angry mobs and local law enforcement again and again and again. He's basically homeless, making his way from town to town, scrounging off the goodwill of others, with his little side-hustle selling tents just barely enough to keep him and his motley gang of misfits out of starvation.

This Paul is a mess: rumpled and crumpled, torn edges fixed with scotch tape, stained with coffee and tea and triple-O sauce, notes and arrows scribbled on the margins. By any earthly standard of measurement, ever since that fateful ride to Damascus, Paul's life has gone straight down the tubes.

And Paul knows it. He admits it. "We are afflicted in every way – we are perplexed, persecuted, struck down, carrying death in our body. Our outer nature is wasting away." Paul knows exactly how much he has suffered over the years, exactly how much he has lost since that day on the road to Damascus.

But Paul also knows exactly how much he has gained. "Yes, we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed – perplexed, but not driven to despair. Persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed, carrying in our body the death of Christ, so that the world can see the life of Jesus Christ in us. Our outer nature is wasting away, but our inward nature is being renewed, refilled, replenished, over and over again, each and every day."

Paul knows exactly what he lost on the road to Damascus, but he also knows what he gained, because on that day in Damascus, God declared that Paul would be an instrument – the Greek word is *skyoo-os*, it means a vessel or jar that will carry God's name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel, a vessel that will suffer for the sake of the name of Jesus Christ.

And to the church in Corinth, Paul uses that same word, skyoo-os, to describe himself and to describe the church – we are all fragile clay instruments, vessels, jars that outwardly seem weak, but that carry within a treasure beyond compare. That young brash Paul who rode out of Jerusalem all those years ago, sure, his outer nature was successful and strong, but inwardly he was breathing out threats and murder, his vessel was outwardly impressive but inside, it was filled to the brim with hatred and poison and rage, seething and bubbling out of him with every breath.

And now all these years later, the vessel may not look like much on the outside, but now instead of threats and murder, Paul carries words of light and power and love and life, with every word, every action, every moment of his life, Paul is carrying the name of God out into the world, Paul is telling the story of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to everyone he meets, sharing the grace he's been given, proclaiming the miracle that changed his life forever.

Outwardly, Paul is wasting away, but each and every day, his inner nature is being renewed, his vessel is being refilled with the greatest treasure imaginable, with the love and grace and power of his savior, Jesus Christ.

And if that is true for Paul, and for the church he wrote to in Corinth, then it's true for us as well, for this church here today. We are still God's instruments,

vessels crafted by God to tell the story of Jesus Christ, to carry the name of God into this world around us, to share the love and grace we've experienced here with everyone we meet. And outwardly, we may not look like much.

The church today has lost some of the brashness and boldness we've displayed in decades or centuries past, we've lost the institutional advantages we enjoyed back when Christianity was the default in our society.

The church today is a bit of a mess - we're a little rumpled and crumpled, torn edges fixed with scotch tape, stained with coffee and tea and triple-O sauce, notes and arrows scribbled on the margins, a beat-up old manuscript, a fragile vessel made of clay. Outwardly, we are wasting away. And that's okay. That's exactly how it's meant to be. The church isn't supposed to be strong.

The church isn't supposed to succeed by earthly standards of wealth and power and prestige, to always present a perfect, polished image of how wonderful we think we are. As followers of Jesus Christ, we will always be a little messy on the outside, a little rumpled and crumpled, afflicted but not crushed, struck down but not destroyed, because it's in our weakness and our pain that we make it clear that the power we have comes not from us, but from God – the joy we share, the love we pass on to the world, it doesn't come from us, from our strength, from our success – it all belongs to God.

And as the body of Jesus Christ in the world, we are called to be God's instruments, vessels to carry the name of Jesus Christ to the world around, to shine the light of Jesus Christ wherever there is darkness and struggle and fear.

We are the story Christ is telling, we are the sermon that Christ is preaching, so that in our lives, in word and action, we can reveal the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, even in the midst of our struggles, even in the midst of our pain, so that everyone who hears us will hear the voice of Jesus, everyone who sees us will see the life of Christ made visible through the church.

Every time we serve, every time we share, from the meal on Monday to the Sunday service and everything in between, the church of Jesus Christ pours out the treasure we've been given from broken, chipped, fragile clay jars, because we know that our inner nature will always be replenished, always be renewed, the more we give, the more God's grace sustains and strengthens us and refills every empty place and every broken heart.

The notes are a mess – but the story just gets better and better. And the more we tell that story, the less the messes matter - the story becomes part of who we are, in our messiness and brokenness, the kingdom of God grows and grows.

In the name of Jesus Christ – Amen.