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PRESIDENT'S LETTER - MARCH 04

“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So then death is working in us, but life in you.” (2 Corinthians 4:7-12)

The 2004 CLC Convention will emphasize the glorious ministry of reconciliation - the miracle that God did not impute the sins of the world unto them. God has committed this word of reconciliation to all of us as Christians and in a special way to us as called pastors. The beginning of another Lenten season emphasized the paradox of the fact that the glory of God's saving grace is revealed in connection with the lowliness and shame of the cross. This glory is hid from natural man because the god of this world has blinded the minds of those, who do not believe, lest the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them (2 Corinthians 4:4).

The paradox of the Gospel ministry of reconciliation is that this glorious treasure of the Gospel is contained in earthen vessels. The contrast between the glory of the Gospel of Christ and the lowliness of those people chosen as ambassadors for Christ could not be greater. God chose us as containers for this treasure to make sure that the emphasis would always be on Jesus and the power of the Gospel. In a culture which stresses style over substance, the medium over the message, and equates success with numbers and growth, our ministry stands out as one of humbleness and apparent ineffectiveness.

We are jars of clay. Often treasures were kept in the most common containers to fool thieves. The box or jar is unimportant. Every pastor in the CLC should be acutely aware of his weakness as an earthen vessel. We stand in the corner and without lifting up our eyes, cry out, “God be merciful to me the sinner.” God has chosen forgiven sinners to be the containers for the Gospel of reconciliation. Like the Apostle Paul, we confess that we are “chief of sinners.”

In addition to our personal sinfulness, we are jars of clay because of our human weaknesses and failings. A young pastor is sometimes surprised when people do not seem to do what he tells them God would have them do. Membership losses within a congregation cause a painful period of self-examination. Church bodies and congregations begin to look for ways to attract people. Each of us needs to realize our area of weakness whether it is in preaching clearly or a difficulty in getting along with people. Pastors need to realize with Paul that when we are weak then we are strongest. Like Gideon and his army of 300, it is obvious that anything that is accomplished is accomplished by the Lord alone.

Paul describes us as being under attack, but also assures us that God gives us the final victory. We are “hard pressed on every side, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down.” And yet we are **not** “crushed, in utter despair, forsaken by God, or destroyed.” God continually brings us back to Jesus and the cross for our wisdom and our strength. It should be obvious that we as pastors or a church body add nothing to the power of the Gospel. Do not let Satan redirect you

or your people's attention away from the treasure of the Gospel and focus it on the worthless jars of clay.

Our ministry and its weakness constantly focuses the attention of our people on Jesus and His cross. It is a blessed comfort to be assured that whatever good is accomplished through our ministry is accomplished by the dynamite of the Gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit. This needs to be realized by every pastor and also communicated to those who hear the message of reconciliation. It should be obvious that "we have such trust through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God." (2 Corinthians 3:4-5)

This Lenten season it is our privilege to proclaim the Word of reconciliation as it centers in the cross of Christ. We will emphasize not simply the reality and horror of the physical suffering of Jesus as portrayed in *The Passion of the Christ*. We will also emphasize the fact that Jesus' real suffering came as the sin-bearer, the scapegoat for the entire world. We will not try to decide who was responsible for the death of Jesus. Scripture will lead us to confess that we and our sins are personally responsible for the suffering and death of God's holy Son. We will preach Christ crucified and God's Gospel of reconciliation.

Many church sacristies used to have a plaque on which was written Luther's Sacristy Prayer:

Lord God, Thou hast made me a pastor and teacher in the Church. Thou seest how unfit I am to administer rightly this great and responsible office; and had I been without Thy aid and counsel I would surely have ruined it all long ago. Therefore do I invoke Thee. How gladly do I desire to yield and consecrate my heart and mouth to this ministry. I desire to teach the congregation. I, too, desire ever to learn and to keep Thy Word my constant companion and to mediate thereupon earnestly. Use me as an instrument in Thy service. Only do not Thou forsake me, for if I am left to myself, I will certainly bring it all to destruction.

May the Holy Spirit bless your proclamation of the Gospel of reconciliation this Lenten season as you plead with sinners: "Be reconciled to God." God speaks through you. **"So then death is working in us, but life in you"** (2 Corinthians 4:12). So then death is working in us as jars of clay, but life in those who hear and believe our Gospel message."

John Schierenbeck