

Over the years, a number of faculty members at McCormick Seminary have been involved in archaeology. As a result, we have a modest collection of not-very-valuable, but very interesting objects. My favorite is a collection of four dozen lamps that date from the first century – the time of Jesus and Paul. Imagine two thousand years from now unearthing a box of light bulbs, and that’s what we’ve got. In fact, these lamps are almost exactly the size of a modern light bulb. In the first century, you made a shallow bowl out of clay, pinched out a spout where you would lay a cloth wick; add oil; light the wick, and you are in business – light.

One of my colleagues tells me, however, that the main thing one recovers in an archaeological dig is pieces of broken pottery called shards. They are everywhere, these remains of earthen vessels, the discards of everyday life. You would think they would be useless, but apparently they were regularly recycled as writing tablets by scribes who used them to record lists or inventories – the original data storage!

“We have this treasure” – that is, the good news of the gospel – “in clay jars” (or earthen vessels, as some of us learned it) “so that it may be made clear that is extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” Paul is thinking about the fact that clay jars are fragile. Unlike modern plastic containers, they chip; they crack; they break. They are fragile, and so, says Paul, are we. In this passage, he details some of his own tribulations – afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down. Paul knew physical limitation, adversity, failure and eventually imprisonment and execution. He knew that the success of the gospel absolutely did not depend on him. The power of the gospel belongs to God; it does not come from us.

It is always important for the church to remember this. However great the program; however magnificent the building; however powerful the legacy – we are not the point. The gospel is not about us; it’s not about our successes or abilities. It is also not about our failure and short-comings. It is about God, and we are merely the means at this moment of sharing the gospel with others.

Most clay jars end up as pot shards. Most of those who ever preached the gospel are long-forgotten. Most communities of believers have come and gone and left little behind. We are fragile indeed, and so are the churches we build, the theologies we write and the prayers we offer. As Alfred Lord Tennyson famously wrote: “Our little systems have their day; They have their day and cease to be; They are but broken lights of Thee, And Thou, O Lord, art more than they.” Pot shards all of them.

And then there are all those little lamps – most of them as useable today as they were two thousand years ago. A little oil and a wick, and they are good to go. Paul’s metaphor, you see, cuts both ways. Earthen vessels are both fragile and resilient; they can be broken and they can endure; they can shatter in a day or last a thousand life-times.

On this anniversary celebration, I want to suggest that we reflect on both angles of Paul's metaphor, that we think both about fragility and endurance, and that we remember that oil without a lamp will burn but it will be neither safe nor functional. And water without a jar cannot be stored or shared. This morning, as we celebrate 100 years of Presbyterian ministry here in Ames, I want us to think about being earthen vessels and also about the treasure. In particular, I invite us to think about the treasure that is our Reformed tradition – the Presbyterian way of being Christian – that you have been living and sharing here this century past.

As we all know, there are almost as many ways of defining what it means to be Presbyterian as there are Presbyterians. We don't even have the advantage of a story-teller like Garrison Keillor to make our foibles as endearing as he has done with Minnesota Lutherans. So here is one way to think about Presbyterian witness. We are, I think, Christians who *think the faith, engage the world and live with hope.*

Presbyterians are an educated lot: nearly 2/3 of us have at least some college education. We founded schools and colleges as we moved across North America and around the world. We pioneered graduate level theological education. The Christian faith is not only something we feel deeply; it is something we like to think through. The motto of the campus ministry program at one of our Presbyterian colleges is: "God gave us minds and expects us to use them." My own call to ministry grew up in part because of Sunday school teachers. When I was in high school in Pasadena, California, our teachers were mostly faculty members at Cal Tech or on the staff at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. They pretty much abandoned the curriculum and encouraged us to debate ideas about God and values and faith. What I learned from them (as much by their example as anything) was that there is no question that the human mind can ask that can threaten God. The God who made our minds expects us to use them ... to think about God as well as all the other things we need to think about. I became a theologian because I learned as a young adult to love God with my mind.

Presbyterians are Christians who engage the world. The world around us is "the theater of God's glory" and we cannot open our eyes without being compelled to see God, said John Calvin. The world is God's good creation, the Bible teaches. The beauty and intricacy of the natural world invites our wonder and our inquiry, our appreciation and our research and above all our stewardship. Calvin went further than that, however. He recognized that we human beings have the distinctive calling to be fabricators of culture. We make things. We don't just gather food, we cultivate it. We make clothing and shelter. We make societies (ways of living together). We make stories. We make art.

Christianity in general and Protestant Christianity in particular has flourished as a result of things human beings have made. It is hard to imagine the early Christian movement spreading as it did without the Roman technology that built roads across their Mediterranean empire. It is impossible to imagine the firestorm that became the Reformation in the sixteenth century without the invention of moveable type, thus the ability to print books and share ideas quickly across great distances.

I understand the religious impulse to draw away from time to time, to simplify life, to seek God's presence away from the distractions of culture. But I do not understand Christianity that sees culture as intrinsically evil. I do not understand Christians who are afraid of artists. I do not understand Protestants, whose ancestors fought for the principles of religious tolerance and liberty, wanting to impose one form of Christianity on the rest of us.

Presbyterian Christians are not afraid of the world; we believe in engaging the world. We work hard for the well-being of our communities; we help those in need, whether they are next door or across the globe; and we are willing, beyond all reasonable expectation, to serve on committees that will make those things happen!

Presbyterian Christians think the faith, engage the world, and, finally, live with hope. Our way of being Christian is profoundly hopeful precisely because of what Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "this extraordinary power [of the gospel] belongs to God" and not to us. "Our hope is built upon thy promise free," says the one hymn in our hymnal attributed to John Calvin. God has promised to love us, to redeem us, to keep us secure. God's steadfast love endures forever, the psalmist wrote ... over and over and over again. And "nothing in all creation," wrote Paul, "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The "Brief Statement of Faith" the Presbyterian Church wrote twenty years ago says that "we live in a broken and fearful world." It seems to me that this is even more true today than it was then. The level of anxiety and negativity around us is staggering. Columnist David Brooks wrote this past week that we are living in one of the rare times when the economic recovery is not being matched by a psychological recovery. Things economically speaking are much more stable and in many ways better, but we don't feel better. We are still afraid – of unemployment or underemployment, of how we will pay off student loans, of not having enough for retirement, of whether we will be able to afford health care. And many in politics and the media seek to fan the fires of fear by appealing to anger rather than reason.

The most important thing people of faith can do in the face of fear, anxiety and anger is proclaim, as loudly and joyously as we can that *none of this matters in the final analysis*. Our hope is not built on whether or not we have a job or even good health. Our hope is built on God's promise to love us, to redeem us, and to keep us safe forever. Our hope is in the One who raised Christ from the dead and put an end to the power of death. Our hope is that in life and in death, we belong to God. That's what we said last Sunday, remember?

Being a Presbyterian is to be a Christian of a certain type. We are not the only "true Christians;" we make no pretence that ours is the only right way to be faithful. But it is one way, and it is (at least in my experience) profoundly life-giving. As you set out to be in ministry in this place for another century, may God give you the strength to think the faith and provide a community of hospitality for all who would seek to love God with all their heart and soul and mind. May God give you courage to engage the world and to bring the best of the arts and science and culture into this space and into your lives. And may God give you the grace to live with joyful hope, reaching out to all in need, bringing good news by serving meals to the hungry and providing shelter to the homeless and refuge to the frightened and justice for the

dispossessed. And may you rejoice in your calling to be earthen vessels – fragile and resilient but above all instruments of God’s redeeming love.

Amen.