

“Cracked Pots”

2 Corinthians 4:7, Isaiah 43:19 & Psalm 31

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April 28, 2024

Prayer for Understanding May the words of our mouth and meditations of our heart be pleasing to you gracious God our rock and redeemer. amen

At next week’s Annual Meeting, we will have time for you to share your emotions, perceptions, and insights. It is my hope that my sharing will inspire your sharing.

I grew up attending the First Presbyterian Church of Abbotsford where I felt loved and that I belonged. Reverend Everhard was the pastor for all of my childhood and youth. He frequently shared that he was a cracked pot and shared the parable of the cracked pot about once a year.

There once lived a water carrier. Every morning, as soon as the sun rose, she walked from her home to collect water in two earthen pots that hung from a long pole that she carried across her shoulders. One pot was perfectly formed, the other, although the same shape and size as its counterpart, had a crack in its side. So, whenever they returned to the water carrier’s house it was only half full. For years, the water carrier repeated her journey to and from her house collecting water from the river. As the years passed by, the cracked pot created a story in its head about its level of worthiness and inability to properly perform the job for which it had been created. Eventually, the pain and shame that it felt about its own perceived imperfections, became too much for it to bear. So, one day as the water carrier knelt beside the river and began her usual task of filling the pots with water, the cracked pot found its voice and said: “I am so sorry. For years and years, I have watched you fill me with water and I can only imagine what a fruitless task it must be for you. As whenever we return home, I am only ever half full. While in comparison, the other pot is perfect, rarely does it lose a drop of water on our long walk back to our home, but me, I am far from perfect. This crack in my side, not only does it cause me so much hurt and shame, but it must also cause you to want to get rid of me. Surely, I am only making this long, arduous job that you do each day, that much more difficult? I can understand if you are thinking of getting rid of me and replacing me with another perfectly formed pot.” The water carrier listened to these words with both care and compassion. She knew about the crack, but did not see it as an imperfection, or as something that made it less worthy than the other pot that hung from her shoulder. Gently she turned to the pot and said, “On our return walk home, I want you to look up and to the side of you. For too long, it would seem you have been looking down, comparing yourself to others and not noticing how you and the crack that you have in your side has brought untold beauty into my life.” Puzzled, the cracked pot wondered what on-earth her words meant. She seemed to be suggesting that its story of lack, unworthiness and shame, was in some way faulty. As to how this could be, it could not comprehend. However, the cracked pot trusted the water carrier. It occurred to it that in all the time that it had journeyed with her, she had never said a harsh word, never scorned or ridiculed it, but had always shown a sense of gratefulness and care when filling it with water. So, on the return journey it heeded the water carrier’s words. It looked up and it looked out. In its former depressed state, it had not noticed that along the path that they travelled there was a dazzling array of beauty, color, and life. The water carrier in her wisdom, knowing of the crack in the pot’s side, had sprinkled seeds along the path. These seeds were duly watered every day as a result of the crack in the pot’s side and the path that had once been barren and devoid of life was now resplendent with an array of beautiful wildflowers. Now, the cracked pot understood. Now the cracked pot began to see itself in a new light.

The apostle Paul wrote: **2 Corinthians 4:7 “We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves.”**

The parable of the cracked pot resonates with me. I have an abundance of flaws. My dyslexia means I am slower than average to read, write, speak, and process communication. I have always been terrified of public speaking. I feel awkward around people. I often think of what I should have said hours after a conversation. My first reaction to any new situation is no, flee, go back to the familiar. I connect with God through nature and struggle in my understanding of the many other ways God connects with people. My analytical mind sometimes

diminishes my ability to enjoy mystery. I could go on naming many other flaws. And yet God often waters others through my flaws.

The summer before I attended UW-River Falls, Reverend Everhard met with me. He encouraged me to become a pastor. I politely listened as I thought there is no way I will ever be a pastor with all my flaws. He talked about being a cracked pot. To always remember that as a person, and as a church, we are all cracked pots with plenty of flaws. And God's living water flows through us creating beauty. He explained that the church will likely continue to decline in numbers. What is important is not how many participate, how much water one can carry, rather helping a person experience God's grace so they feel that God loves them and that they belong to God's family.

Three years later, Reverend Everhard retired. Due to low attendance, and no leaders, the church was not going to offer youth ministry. I remembered how I felt loved and that I belonged at youth fellowship. So, I thought, I am a cracked pot. I have no training, no experience facilitating youth ministry, and plenty of flaws. And God's grace will flow through my flaws, so I drove two hours each way to facilitate youth ministry. My hope was for the youth to experience God's grace, that they are loved and belong. Peak attendance was three. Sometimes I was the only one. And I sensed that God loved through me.

I have had three profound, mystical, insightful experiences in my life. Times when suddenly a surge of energy flowed through my body. All my senses heightened giving me a feeling of intense connection to God, people, and the cosmos. My body tingled. I felt light. In an instant, volumes of insights were perceived although I am not able to put those insights adequately in words.

The first of these experiences happened on the Deep Freeze Retreat at the Wilderness Fellowship in Frederic, Wisconsin where I was a volunteer youth leader. I had a compelling experience of God's grace. I perceived that God wanted me to become a pastor, so God could love through me to help others experience God's grace. I protested. I am a cracked pot. God assured me that God would work through my flaws.

In seminary, I learned again that the church is a cracked pot. In terms of numbers, the crack is getting deeper and wider. Church attendance peaked in the 50s. We were frequently told that all of us will serve a church of declining attendance and resources.

Denial about declining attendance began in 2000. God abundantly blessed the First Presbyterian Church of Maumee where I served as Associate Pastor with a focus on youth ministry. During those five years youth ministry flourished. And I had the honor of serving with others facilitating growing presbytery youth events and growing ecumenical youth events. This growth was a remarkable exception to the overall trend.

Denial continued when I began serving here in 2005 as we grew in attendance for several years. I realize growth is never about me, rather God blessing through the we of the church. During these years, I forgot some of the insights of the cracked pot. The focus should not be on how much water I can carry, how many people attend, a balanced budget, rather is someone being watered through me.

My flaws are unique. There are plenty of people that will not experience God through me and that is fine for God is watering them through other people and other ways. If one person is being watered through me, then ministry is happening.

Around 2012, the accelerating decline of church participation in the United States, neighboring churches, and North drove me to prayer, research, listening to session, and serving with you to launch a series of new ministries. My denial took the form of working harder.

For 29 consecutive years, I facilitated some type of Deep Freeze Retreat with youth. Twenty-one of those years was at the Wilderness Fellowship. In 2019, everyone and everything was packed in the vehicles. We were ready to leave the Wilderness Fellowship. I had the overwhelming sense I forgot something. I went back to the cabin. As I put my hand on the doorknob, I had my second, profound, mystical, and insightful experience. In an instant, I saw all the people who ever attended a retreat. Then, I perceived this was the last time I would enter this space. This was the last Deep Freeze Retreat which puzzled me for I reserved the cabin for next year when I checked out. I opened the door seeing the light shining through the window illuminating the spot where I had my first experience with the message of grace. Suddenly, I was emotionally numb from feeling many emotions intensely at once. Gratitude for all the people who helped me experience God's grace. Honor for all the people I have been able to serve. Joy that God gave them an experience of grace through me. Wonder in the majesty of the cosmos. Delight in the myriad of ways God loves. The veil of denial was lifted. Sadness that I would not return to this place. Grief for the temporary loss of 171 people who I have had the honor of celebrating their

resurrection. Nostalgia for the church past. Anxiety about the church future. Sorrow for the people who no longer feel that church is their family. Frustration with my struggle to communicate how deeply I care for people. Shame that I am not able to help the church grow in numbers. Discouraged that no one has a way that will grow the institutional church. Embarrassed that a desire for more participants and a balanced budget, distracts me from the joy of serving someone. Bewilderment as I saw people from throughout my life. Confusion as to what to do next. Entangled as to who to be. Grief over the many ministries that have already died. Joyful excitement in resurrection ministries that have already emerged. Glad anticipation of the coming resurrection church. And a multitude of other emotions. With my denial dispersed I accepted that the institutional church as I know it, is dying and will cease to exist as I have experienced it. Thankfully I believe every death gives rise to resurrection. The institutional church as I know it will die. A resurrected church will emerge.

The prophet Isaiah declares God's message to us. **Isaiah 43:19 "Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"**

Later that year, Leslie, Spencer, Abigail and I used the money we inherited from her parents to go on a trip to Hawaii. It was a spectacular trip. On the plane home, I had the third profound, mystical, and insightful experience. The message was remember the love, joy, peace, and wonder of this trip. Remember for you are about to go through a season of numerous losses and intense grief. Remember as you endure pain. Remember as you row through storms. Remember.

As I stood to debark the plane, I experienced inflammation and intense joint pain which intensified into chronic pain. Two major ways through which I experience God walking and biking at times was unbearable. Pain interrupted my sleep. Sleeplessness and pain accentuated my flaws. My grief came in overwhelming waves as I experienced numerous losses. When I entered church, I became numb, feeling numerous intense emotions. Grateful joy for all the wonderful loving service that has happened here. Grief for all the people that are no longer here. I lamented where they sat. Mourned how they loved. I had my first panic attack as I pondered the future of the church. I went through a season when it took all my energy just to get out of bed and do the essentials. Intense shame haunted me despite being told in numerous ways, from numerous sources, that the decline of participation in the institutional church as I know it, is inevitable. I believed that somehow, I was to blame for the decline in participation. My counselor told me it is not enough to know, it is not my fault. I need to believe, it is not my fault. Pain and a series of losses magnified my grief.

The psalmist sings: **Psalm 31: Select phrases "I will be glad and rejoice in your unfailing love, for you have seen my troubles and you care about the anguish of my soul. Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am in distress. Tears blur my eyes. My body and soul are withering away. I am dying from grief; my years are shortened by sadness. Sin has drained my strength; I am wasting away from within. I am scorned by all my enemies and despised by my neighbors—even my friends are afraid to come near me. I am ignored as if I were dead, as if I were a broken pot. I have heard the many rumors about me and I am surrounded by terror. In your unfailing love, rescue me. Praise the Lord, for God has shown me the wonders of God's unfailing love. So be strong and courageous, all you who put your hope in the Lord!"**

In 2023, I made numerous changes in numerous aspects of my life that makes my physical pain manageable and is making whole my life. Most nights, I am able to sleep again. An exception was when I pondered what we should do at the Annual Meeting. I perceived. Let it go. It is God's church. Let it go. The church that inspired me is not the church that will inspire people in the future. Let it go. God's grace will touch everyone in new ways. Let it come. A resurrected church is coming. Let it come. The message of the cracked pot returned. Let go of trying to carry all the water. Be a cracked vessel. Let go of trying to mend my flaws. I need to let God's grace flow through me to water another. Even if I am able to help only one person experience God's grace, then I am a good servant.

I am grateful for the blessings of the church past. I am excited about the church future for I believe God is constantly guiding us to ever-expanding love. I am striving to live in the present, savoring the honor of serving with you, savoring blessings and sharing blessings.

Pastor, historian, researcher and consultant Gil Rendle wrote: "There is no going back because the "back" that is remembered does not exist anymore. Our current reality is that we are not in a turnaround situation. Leaders cannot take us back to a more comfortable time when the church was established at the heart of the culture as a bedrock, trusted institution. We have steadily lost participants since 1965. Our members have

steadily gotten older. Organized religion attracts a continuously shrinking percentage of each successive generation. Ours is not a turnaround situation and we have little that we can return to. Faced with the data about their institutional decline the church began a deep investment in the 1970's in ways to renew, redevelop or transform congregations with the assumption that if congregations got more effective, they could reclaim the strength of their remembered past. But it will not reclaim the past. Such current work on vitality will only provide a new base from which vital congregations will learn how they need to continue to change in order to live in the culture that now is and not how to recapture a culture that once was. The ending of a time of growth is a time of confusion." End quote.

Gil invites church members, and pastors, to let go of their shame over the decline of the institutional church. Be grateful for a wonderful season. Grieve its passing. Be open to the resurrection church that will emerge. The church has gone through death and resurrection numerous times. Every 500 years, the church goes through a devastating death and a radically different resurrection. We are currently at that point in history.

I am aware that my emotions and experiences color everything. After much anxiety, grieving, processing, reflecting, praying, I am at the point that whichever of the three options we choose at the Annual Meeting I will continue to serve, striving to be a cracked pot, to carry some of God's grace and share some of God's grace so people feel loved and that they belong. Maybe God is calling us to move beyond churches and religions to a new way of being, one beloved worldwide family where all belong and all are loved. As Red Green says. "Remember, I am pulling for you. We are all in this together." Since I do not know the future and speculation over the future church is all over the place, I will strive to be a cracked pot today, gratefully savoring the living water of blessings God continually pours into me and blessing others by freely letting the living water flow through me to bless others. No matter what, we are all loved by God, we all belong to God and will be loved forever. Amen