

We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But 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. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

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Some 20 years ago, I was in Santa Fe, New Mexico, browsing the art galleries along Canyon Road when I was enchanted by a gorgeous piece of pottery.

The artist had fired the pot in a style called "raku," which in Japanese means "joy of freedom." Japanese potters developed the style of unglazed pottery for Zen masters to use in tea ceremonies. The masters appreciate raku's humility, its tasteful modesty, simple naturalness and deliberate lack of grandeur.

Zen masters value raku pottery mostly for its subtle beauty. Raku is not a good choice for some purposes because it can hold liquids for only a short time. Just so, raku teaches that life and enlightenment are meant to be shared, not saved for oneself. Zen masters say that in contemplating the raku form, if we are awake to our true selves, we will recognize our own spirit.

And now there is a raku pot sitting in our living room.

The potter who created our pot first turned a lump of brown clay into a squat, round shape like a Hubbard squash. Then he heated the raw clay until it reached somewhere between 1,800° and 2,000°. Next, he dropped it into a bed of dry leaves and covered it with more leaves and other combustible dead organic material.

The tremendous heat and sudden cooling put cracks in the pot, as permanent proof of a rather dramatic experience. The leaves and pine needles surrounding the pot caught fire and stained the pot with subtle colors and tones of black that are unique to each work of art. The artist then fixed those markings by immersing the pot in water, not

entirely unlike a baptism. Colors flared and faded, leaving only a trace on the hardened clay.

And with that, the cycle of earth, fire, air and water was complete. But then the artist added something else. And it was the addition that caught my eye, and opened my heart and my wallet.

The firing process, you see, didn't just crack the pot but, by design, broke it into several pieces. The artist carefully put the pieces back together by skillfully working and fixing copper wire into the cracks, grinding them to fit flush to the surface and polishing them so that they glint and play with light.

To this day, in contemplating this modest pot, I can find a reflection of my own spirit. I can recognize the beautiful true spirit of the church with light shining through her brokenness; light shining out of darkness. I see in this work of art a brilliant image of the spiritual truth that Paul wrote about in his second letter to the church in Corinth.

The light of God, you see, does not come through perfect, pristine undamaged people. The light of God shines through real people. People with life histories. People who have *known* suffering and people who have *caused* suffering. People who have learned to forgive and to ask forgiveness. It is exactly through our collective and uniquely individual cracks that the light of God shines like polished copper to illuminate the knowledge of God's glory in the face of the Anointed.

"We have this treasure in vessels of clay," Paul wrote, "so that it is clear that this extraordinary belongs to God and does not come from us."

And just like a carefully created raku pot, the church and you and I are afflicted, yet not crushed, even when it feels that way. Perplexed, yet not despairing. Persecuted, yet not forsaken. Struck down, yet not destroyed.

God's power is like gleaming metal holding together a plain, shattered brown pot; a pot stained by the remains of what has been burned away from it. We are always carrying in within us the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus – God's love – can be made manifest in our lives, our mortal bodies, just as they are.

These may seem dark times. And there is reason for staying awake to the truth. All the more reason for cleaning up our own mistakes or misplaced loyalties, and for growing into our lives as God's

children so that the light of God's love can be seen through our imperfections. These may seem dark times and our work is crucial.

The darkness is ancient.

In the few short years between Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth and this second letter, a number of false leaders have infiltrated the church. Paul calls them "superlative-apostles" as an ironic reference to their pattern of showy, self-centered arrogance.

These self-promoting "superlative-apostles" are also calling for actions based on social divisions. They are teaching an exclusionary gospel, an isolating spirit and a prejudicial Jesus – teachings that blame others for the problems and suffering of the world, and yet leave dealing with that suffering to someone else.

In this letter, Paul reminds the church that he and those working with him do not proclaim *themselves*. Instead, they proclaim the good news that the love of God is given for all people.

So, you see, the darkness is not new. But neither is this divisive darkness only a specter of the past.

In the 1920s, a politician named Clifford Walker joined the Ku Klux Klan, who taught that Jesus was a Protestant. Walker, a leader claiming to be a follower of Christ, then stirred up enough support to be elected governor of Georgia. Riding a wave of fear, he offered a platform for white working class voters that played on their darkest impulses: "I would build a wall of steel," he told them, "a wall as high as Heaven, against the admission of a single one of those Southern Europeans who never thought the thoughts or spoke the language of a democracy in their lives."

During the Great Depression, Fr. Charles Coughlin, a Roman Catholic priest, was an influential radio commentator in Michigan. Ironically, Fr. Coughlin began his radio broadcasts in response to the Ku Klux Klan burning crosses on the grounds of his church. He started out feeding fear and separation as an anti-Communist. But by the mid-1930s, Fr. Coughlin, another leader claiming to be a follower of Christ, had turned his separatist hatred toward the Jews. "When we get done with the Jews in America," he told his audience, "they'll think the treatment they received in Germany was nothing."

So you see, the "superlative apostles" that Paul warned us about have always been with us and always will be. They will have some

momentary successes. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said that “evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross.” That self-centered, divisive evil has been and always will be available to each and every one of us – *if we choose it*.

Even so, the darkness in human nature is not insurmountable. Because something else has *also* always been with us and always will be: the greater spiritual truth of the Risen Christ that *will* ultimately prevail. Because of *that* truth, Dr. King could go on to say that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

Along the way, the choking smoke, blinding flashes and searing heat of dead fears and dying prejudices burning around us will leave marks and even a few cracks behind. At the same time, the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” will still shine through human hearts.

God’s light will shine forever through human lives lived in humility. Lives lived in the knowledge that our purpose is not to gratify our own selfishness, but to serve God’s creation; that our intent is not to cling to any “correct doctrine” that excludes and humiliates, but to spread the awareness that we flourish only when *everyone* flourishes.

What makes a pot useful, you see, is the opening – the space – that it contains. And we are fragile, created to hold the light for only a short time. Even so, we are humble pottery in the hands of a brilliant artist. The light that shines through us, if we will selflessly clean out space for it, is the eternal light of God’s love. And, in the end, God’s love will burn away all fear, every hate and even death itself.

That truth is the light in the darkness that draws us along right paths in the world; that guides our stumbling toward suffering in our neighbor and those we do not yet understand. Through all our human efforts, if we will constantly turn toward Christ, the Risen Anointed One will be there, forgiving our short-comings, even when we become so self-centered that we mistake the servant for the master; the art for the artist.

The whole point of the journey into the fiery love of God, you see, is to mature from self-acceptance to self-awareness to self-forgetfulness. We evolve until the emphasis on ourselves gradually drops away in adoration of God. Through the fire of that process, God can make visible in our mortal bodies the masterpiece that we carry

within us; the “treasure in clay jars” that is God’s love given for all creation.

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