

Christ Presbyterian Church
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Life Verses: 2 Corinthians 4:1-15
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It has been an awesome process watching those letters there [6-foot letters spelling L-I-F-E] grow with the life verses people have been writing. We are nearing the end of our series of sermons called Life Verses. The preachers in this series have been asked to look at a passage of Scripture that has been particularly meaningful in shaping aspects of our own lives and speak on it. That was an easy task for me. The passage I chose has resonated with me for most of my life throughout my journey of faith as a believer and person who has felt called into a life of ministry and yet on the other hand, oftentimes struggled with a real sense of inadequacy to that task.

Most of us, if we were asked to begin to give a defense of our work, of our lives, of the way that we do things, of why we do things, we would rarely think about looking into the difficulties. We wouldn't look at the struggles or the weaknesses of our lives. We would want to talk about our accomplishments. We would want to talk about our successes. And yet here in 2nd Corinthians, chapter 4, the apostle Paul is defending his life and his ministry to the Corinthian church which, you may know, had issues with his leadership. He begins by talking about his weaknesses, his struggles. He talks about the way he sees defeat operating in his life, but it's a context where he also sees life at work.

Christianity is about a deliverance from the old into the new. Christianity is about the newness of His creation coming, life coming into our life, of death being reversed. But the community of God's people and the new creation takes shape where? It takes shape in the midst of the old creation, in the midst of communities that are broken, in the midst of lives that are broken. The apostle Paul is showing us here that this is not something that gets in the way of the Gospel's advance, the outworking of the good news, but rather, it becomes the very context of its advance; that somehow our weaknesses, our struggles, play into our growth as disciples of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So with that introduction, let's now read my life verse, the passage that I chose for today, 2nd Corinthians 4, starting with verse 5.

⁵ For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

¹⁰ We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹ For we who are alive are always being given over to

death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. ¹² So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

Let's pray.

Lord, move us beyond our own pinched and stunted imaginations and limited understanding about what makes life work. I pray, God, that You would help us see ourselves as part of what You're doing, graciously including us in the ministry of life that You are bringing to us through Jesus. Lord, help us receive that with open arms in Christ's Name. Amen.

For the last several weeks, my wife and her sister and, of course, the two husbands, have been in the process of helping my in-laws sell their home in Wisconsin so that they can be closer to us here in the Twin Cities. A whole variety of health crises have led us to this point. As you might imagine, it's been a rather daunting task, moving not only tons of stuff, material possessions and all of that, but also decades of memories, experiences, and marking moments, and trying to consolidate all of these things into a much smaller space, both physical and in many ways, emotional and spiritual.

This whole process took me back to eight years ago when my wife Andrea and I made the decision to move to Minnesota to join the staff here at CPC, leaving behind our life in northern California. We had the task in front of us of having to sell our home, but the greater challenge was selling our home while we were still living in it—with small kids. I think some of you can relate to that. It wasn't easy or fun. We hired a real estate agent, a young woman down the street who was one of our neighbors, and one of the first things she told us was that if we really wanted to sell our house, we needed to do something called staging. Now we had never heard of staging, so that was a kind of a novel concept for us. If you've not heard of staging a home, it's something like this. You or some decorator you pay comes into your home and removes all clutter and, basically, does things like put pillows where we know they never stay. And sort of drape this luscious afghan over the bed, and the afghan is kind of caressing this tray holding maybe a pot of tea and a few scones on a china plate. There are all kinds of other things that are done. Flowers, pictures that are placed just right.

Essentially, what it means to stage a home is to make it look like no one lives there. It's almost as if the unstated message is "Buy this house and your life will be this together too. Buy this house and you'll be in the perfect container that will hold all of your belongings and keep your life in perfect *feng shui* balance and symmetry." As a side note, after they staged our house, Andrea and I decided to do this *Undercover Boss* kind of a thing where during one of the open houses, we snuck into our own house, you know, just to kind of hear what the comments were from people looking at it. We heard all kinds of oooohs and aaaaahs and at the end, I turned to Andrea and said, "I want to live here!" And, of course, she reminded me that we already did and we were trying to sell it.

To stage a house is to kind of make it look like what you would find in the pages of *Sunset Magazine*, the magazine of western living. The magazine features beautiful homes in beautiful, perfect places and explains how to do things such as build the beautiful, perfect deck that is attached to the beautiful home on which you eat the beautiful and perfect meals that are made using the recipes that are found in the magazine. What's interesting, though, is if you file through *Sunset Magazine* to the back, to the classified ad section all the way at the end, in this

magazine of perfect western living in perfect homes in perfect places, guess what is in want ads there? Ads for military schools, places to send your teenagers to school because you can't handle them. We can spend our lives making the perfect container, trying to project and show the world that we have it all together, but the dirty little secret in the back of *Sunset Magazine* is that we don't have it all together. Families just like mine, just like yours, still fall apart whether or not we look like we have it all together. Think of what's going on inside of all those perfect homes in perfect places that have every detail in place.

One of my favorite TV characters is Bree Van de Kamp on *Desperate Housewives*. Bree is the quintessential example of outward perfection with every hair in place, every nail perfectly manicured, every place setting ready for the perfect dinner party, yet behind closed doors, a life completely and tragically out of control. The container might look great but take a peek inside, and what do you see? It's kind of a different twist on what Jesus said to the Pharisees when He said, "Oh, you Pharisees, you love to wash everything on the outside. You love to make it all pristine and beautiful but inside, is there transformation? As you take care and polish the container of your lives, is there something similar happening on the inside?" And Jesus says, "For the most part, no, there isn't. Because you apply your laws and your rules and your beautifiers like cosmetics, but inside you are rotting and decaying. You're like whitewashed tombs, you Pharisees."

The containers don't always give witness to what's going on inside. That's why it's interesting that Paul discusses containers and kind of flips this image for us in 2nd Corinthians 4. You see, what he's doing is addressing himself to a Corinthian church that basically doesn't like the container of Paul's ministry. And guess what the container of Paul's ministry is? Paul! They don't like the way that he presents. They don't really much like his message. In Corinth, there was this faction of people who were triumphalists. They loved talking about the resurrection and the victory of Jesus, but Good Friday and the cross didn't make much sense to them, and so they spiritualized it or passed right over it. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians says, "You know, the cross seems to be foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews. You Greeks laugh at it because it doesn't seem to have any power to it, and you Jews stumble over it because the Messiah isn't supposed to be the way Jesus was on the cross."

But he's really addressing himself especially to the Greeks in Corinth, who just can't look at the cross of Jesus Christ because it is not victorious enough. They had a hard time not only with Paul's message but also with Paul's person because he wasn't very impressive. There were other preachers who had come along who were more impressive, who had flowery speech and this amazing demeanor and were just the kind of person you would want to follow, but Paul was not impressive. They didn't like his appearance. They didn't like the way he presented, the way he used words, and so they complained about the container that the message was being brought to them in.

But Paul directs their attention away from himself and back toward God. He says, "We are engaged in this ministry by the mercy of God." That is what he writes in verse 1 of 2nd Corinthians 4. I love that word *mercy*. It is such a rich word. In our modern day jargon, we think of it as a word that means something like, "Please, God, don't hit us." Or "Please have mercy on us; don't snuff us out. Don't hit us with a lightning bolt." That is sometimes how we think of the phrase *have mercy* as if those are words that can only be said in the midst of fear and groveling, but that is not the New Testament view of that word.

Mercy is actually a wonderful, gentle word that describes the loving-kindness of God. Certain versions literally talk about the innards, the entrails, the depths of God's feeling, the tender mercies of God. Mercy at its core is gift, undeserved gift. It is this loving bestowment of something we did nothing to deserve, but nevertheless, is given to us. Paul says essentially, "This ministry that we're doing, this thing that you're complaining about, this thing that you're criticizing us over, really isn't ours to begin with. It never was. We didn't have anything to do with it. We didn't do anything to win it. It isn't a prize that we were given because we were so qualified. It's not something God handed to us because we could be so trusted with it because we'd proved that."

Quite the contrary. Paul calls himself the least of all the apostles, and I don't think he is just on some false humility trip here. He really believed that he was the least of the apostles because he was, you will remember, a persecutor of the church. And how in the world could a persecutor of the church be the one who actually brings this life-giving message of the mercy of God? He knew his inadequacy for the task. The Corinthians didn't need to remind him of that. But what Paul *does* is point them back in the direction the message comes from, the heart of God. Paul says, "We didn't do anything to earn this ministry. God just bestowed it upon us as a gift. We're carrying something that we never could have come up with on our own. So don't criticize us. We're just being ourselves, delivering the message that God has given us to give to you. We're giving witness to that which is not ourselves but God's. We have this ministry by the mercy of God, not by reward of our own behavior."

Then in verse 7 Paul essentially affirms them once again for their opinion of him and says, "You're absolutely right about this, guys! We hold this Gospel, this valuable treasure, this incredibly valuable gift, in a clay pot, a clay pot that is our body. We deliver this valuable treasure to you in the most low and menial form of kitchen vessel, the kind that you have a lot of because they break so easily and are cheap to buy. Compared to this message," says Paul, "this treasure that we carry, we are cheap, fragile, irreparable, expendable earthen pots, so you're right about us, Corinth. We are not impressive, but we carry something that's incredibly impressive."

"Our function is to give witness to that, and our failure or our perceived failure on your part because you can't pick it up, well, that's no reflection on the message. That's more of a reflection on your ability to receive it." Paul says, "We're clay pots. We may be beaten up, we may be bruised, we may have been persecuted. We may not look very victorious in your mind as we spread this Gospel of the victory of Jesus, but we don't lose heart. We keep going. We have confidence because what we know is that we carry something that is far more valuable than anything we have to offer in and of ourselves. We don't lose heart because even if we are weak, even if we don't do a great job in presenting this to you in a way that will convince you, in a way that you can receive, what is still true is that you have business to do with God. You have business to do with God, Corinth, and not even our weakness can get in the way of that business. So we do not lose heart. You may not hear this message through us, but God is going to keep sending it to you. That much we know."

We often think about these words that Paul gives us in 2nd Corinthians as maybe a principle that applies to our work as evangelists, as sharers of the Gospel of the good news, as believers, as followers of Jesus, that we should see ourselves as weak vessels, like Paul, who carry the precious contents of the Gospel to others. But I think there's even a deeper implication and application of this notion of receiving, not just our ministry but our entire lives, which our ministry

is a part of, receiving it as a gift from God. And it's a message that teaches us about stewarding our lives, because when we see our lives as a gift from God, we really do see life differently.

Paul talks in this text about the god of this age or the god of this world, and he's not talking about the God who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ. He is talking about Satan. He is talking about the evil force of the systems, the principalities and powers that we live in every single day. He says, "The god of this world blinds you to the reality of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It puts a veil over it because it makes you think you understand that life is primarily about acquiring and retaining your victory that you so want to win. But that's the lie of the god of this world because what gives shape to life is not acquiring and retaining and maintaining and winning and holding, all of the things that you think will help you hold onto life and hold it together. What life is about is not building a container in order to hold the things that you have acquired and to protect those things from everybody else. That is not what life is about," he says.

Life is about receiving and sharing. If life is given to us as a gift by the mercy of God, then it's not ours to go and seize. It's ours to open our hands and our arms in order to receive. It's not ours to hold onto and try to protect, but it's ours to hold onto loosely and share. The abundance is always going to be there because the source of that abundance has no limits. God just keeps giving that mercy and grace. Life isn't about winning the hard-fought battle of getting everything in place so it can be in perfect balance.

I love that. Everyone, and especially me, says, "Oh I just want some balance in my life." I can't tell you how many times I've said that in the last nine months. If I could just get balance in my life, then things would be okay. If I had all of the things on either side of the scale that would keep me in perfect balance, life would be so good. Everything would be in perfect symmetry. So my task is to get it all in balance, but that's not what life is about in God's scheme of things. It's about receiving this life-giving Word, that even though we're flawed and vulnerable clay pots, God still puts His treasure into us. But that doesn't keep us from fighting hard to try to achieve that self-won battle for the acquisition of balance. But if it's a balance we try to retain without God, frankly, it's a balance that is in vain, and often trying to achieve and retain that balance is the very thing that pulls us apart.

When we go on family trips, I tend to be the one who gets the job of arranging our stuff so that it all fits in the car. I like that job because it gives me something tangible that I can order and control. It's kind of become the joke, actually, among my kids, to see how far they can push my buttons. They know how totally uptight and anal about those things I can get when vacation is supposed to be all about fun and relaxing. Like the car is completely sealed up and then some kid says, "Well, Dad, I forgot my bike." "Okay, fine. Put it on your lap. It is not going in the back of the car." Of course, what they don't realize is that you can't get to the fun and the relaxing if you don't have everything just right, in preparation for the trip.

The same goes with projects around the house. I like to be the one who mows the lawn because I am the only one who knows how to do it right. Nobody else cares about it as much as I do. I'll go on these hyper cleaning and yard work binges just to get things to that perfect place, and then I'll set up all kinds of rules and regulations in the house so that no one disrupts the perfect balance I've just created for everyone's enjoyment. But guess what? The balance never holds because it was never about everyone else's enjoyment. It was about my obsession with holding everything together.

Well, it never works. Within two or three days, it's all back to chaos again, and that's because, life simply happens and when life happens, our balance gets disrupted. We try to maintain it, but it's really impossible for very long. All those containers that we build to organize all of those fragments of our lives to keep everything in perfect symmetry and balance, they don't come through for us because life happens. A parent gets ill. A child has a crisis, and that's just my life. I'm not even talking about you guys. It's much better, therefore, to loosen our grip than it is to maintain that tightly held, almost death grip on the things we think we need to have to sustain ourselves. When we maintain that death grip on acquiring and maintaining, well, ultimately we fail to receive the mercy of God. But if we can loosen that grip and receive and share, we're much richer people because God has bestowed on us the greatest of all gifts, His loving-kindness, and that is not going away. It's what Paul says holds us together. Paul says it for us best in Philippians 4.

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The great irony here, Paul says in Philippians 2, is that the One who had all the power, the One who had all the control, is the One,

⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

It is that death on the cross and the resurrection and subsequent victory over death that we celebrate every Sunday when we gather together as the Body of Christ on a Sunday like today. When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we celebrate that alternate victory, that countercultural direction that Christ took when He who was powerful took on meekness. On the night on which He was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread and having given thanks, broke it saying, "This is My Body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of Me." Likewise, after the Supper, He took the cup saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My Blood which has been shed for many for the forgiveness of sins." Paul reminds us that as often as we partake of the bread and the cup, we proclaim Christ's victorious death until He comes again.

Lord Jesus, we thank You that it is not by power nor by might but by Your Spirit that these things come to pass. In Christ's Name. Amen

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.