

# **“A CHURCH OF CRACKED POTS”**

**Matthew 9:35-10:4; Romans 5:1-8**

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

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I have a perspicacious parable for us to ponder at the beginning of the sermon. Sometimes to satisfy my voracious alliterative appetite, I overreach for words like *perspicacious* for which even I the writer must check the dictionary to be certain I am using it correctly. Perspicacious, in case you do not know, is a synonym for percipient. Does that clear things up? Perspicacious, the dictionary informs, means discerning, astute, wise, sharp-witted. This parable is all of these things. It is a familiar story I am going to tell and maybe you have heard it but even so it bears another hearing because, well, it is perspicacious! Hear now the parable:

There was a water bearer in India who had two large pots. One of the pots was attached to one end of a pole and the other pot to the other end. The water bearer carried the pole across the back of his neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, and while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the water bearer’s long journey from the stream to his master’s house, the cracked pot arrived only half full.

For two years this happened every day with the water bearer delivering only one and a half pots of water to his master’s house. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishment. But the cracked pot was ashamed of its imperfection and miserable it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do.

After two years of feeling like a failure, the cracked pot spoke one day to the water bearer while he was filling the pots by the stream. “I am embarrassed and I want to apologize to you.” “Why?” inquired the water bearer. “Why are you embarrassed?” “These past two years,” the cracked pot said, “I have been able to deliver only half my load. This crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your master’s home. Because of my flaws, you do all of this work but do not get full value from your labor,” the cracked pot lamented.

The water bearer was solicitous of the old cracked pot and in his compassion responded gently. “As we return to my master’s house today, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path.” Indeed, as they climbed the hill, the old cracked pot saw the sun shining on gorgeous wild flowers on the side of the trail and this cheered the cracked pot a little. But arriving at their destination, the cracked pot still felt melancholy because it had leaked out half its load. So it apologized again to the bearer for its deficiency.

The water bearer said to the pot, “Did you notice there were flowers only on your side of the path, but not on the other pot’s side? That is because I have known about your imperfection from the beginning and I turned it into a blessing. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path and every day as we walked back from the stream you watered them. For two years I have been able to pick beautiful flowers with which to gladden my master’s table. Without you being the way you are, my master would not have had the grace of fresh flowers adorning his home.”

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There are some of us who have a hard time believing God can use us to bring God’s love and light and hope to people’s lives and to the world. There are some of us who do not think God can use us because of our faults, our sins, or our shortcomings of which we are too painfully aware and haunt us. There are some of us who do not like ourselves very much because of things we have done or that have happened to us in the past we think disqualify us from being used and loved by God.

As I look at the history and reality of my own life, I am aware I am much more the cracked pot than the perfect one. But also I have noticed across the course of years it often is my weakness, fragility, and vulnerability through which God best and most efficaciously has used me. God can use even cracked pots to accomplish God’s purposes.

Our gospel reading this morning is mostly a listing of the twelve original disciples of Jesus: *Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother, Andrew; James the son of Zebedee, and his brother, John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew, the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean; and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.*

<sup>1</sup>

Over the years, with the possible exception of Judas, these disciples have acquired a kind of sanitized saintliness. The artwork on the bulletin cover hints at an altar-boy quality about them.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 10:2-4

But the staff was provided this week from what we shall call this morning “an unnamed source” an alternate pictorial rendering of the disciples we thought in the end we better not use. In it, the disciples were portrayed as a much more rakish and reckless crew, a little too irreverent for a bulletin cover but probably closer to who they really were when they were enlisted by Jesus. They were not chosen by Jesus to help to “carry his water” because they were perfect pots. They were cracked pots, each one, yet Jesus found them entirely suitable for the mission God had in mind.

I love the listing in Matthew’s gospel of the disciples, the apostles. It does not make for scintillating reading but it once again reminds us the Christian faith is not meant to be abstracted or talked about only or theorized over. It is to be lived. It is to be lived in the lives of the disciples Matthew mentioned and in our lives.

*Trum, the professor; Jim the physician environmentalist; Ruth and Tracee; Ayuen and Michael and Arnie; Donna the Presbyterian and Carlin the other Presbyterian;<sup>2</sup> Bill the inventor and Jane and Anna the botanical gardeners; Tom, astonishingly the husband of Lori; Margee the activist and Jane the organizer; Dave the repairer of clocks and Sandy the peace zealot; Nancy the hero administrator; Ellen the musician; Elaine the writer and Elaine the photographer; Tom, son of Sam and Carol, the farmer provocateur; Mary Lou the artist; Ardith of the compassionate heart; Dave the educator; Paul the poet; and Rebecca the nurse.*

Good people, all. Perfect people, not one of them. I hope none take exception to my calling them cracked pots, but I am only saying what the Bible does. We each of us are on that list of Christ’s disciples and apostles and every one of us is a cracked pot. We are a church of cracked pots! We each are cracked in our own ways but we all are cracked pots. It is our cracks and dents, though, through which the Spirit of Christ finds entree in us and works in us so we may do the work that is in God’s heart for us.

What is that work? According to the gospel it is teaching, preaching, healing, casting out demons, reconciling enemies, making peace, raising the dead, and “helping to shepherd the helpless sheep.”<sup>3</sup> But, we exclaim, “That sounds serious. That is heavy lifting. Does not God need perfect pots to accomplish that work?” No, the gospel says, cracked pots will do. Cracked pots like Peter, Andrew, and John. Cracked pots like you and me.

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<sup>2</sup> Everyone in this list is, of course, a Presbyterian. But Donna and Carlin Wenger each are past Moderators of the Presbytery of Carlisle, parliamentarians, and learned in Presbyterian and Reformed theology and polity.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 9:36

Who have been the most effective bearers of the gospel for you? Who are the people who have helped you most in your life? People who try to make you to think they have it all together? People who let you know at every turn how accomplished they are? People whose favorite topic is themselves? People who are self-righteous or sanctimonious?

Or is it people who are not afraid to admit they are cracked pots? People who know and acknowledge the healing favor of God in their lives? People who know they are neither self-made nor self-sufficient but the repeated recipients of grace, forgiveness, mercy, and love?

For me, it has been the latter. Qualities like accessibility, approachability, and humility are gospel qualities. Qualities like honesty, authenticity, and integrity. Rather than chastening or chastising us for being cracked pots, God works in and through our brokenness and imperfection to serve God's ways.

Knowing we are cracked pots who owe our own inclusion in the kingdom of God to the grace and love of God, with our blessed brokenness we water the seeds God has strewn along the pathways of the world until they become beautiful flowers: cleansing lepers by our efforts to bring back into community those who because of their worldly condition are left out or left behind; casting out demons by our refusal to allow systemic bigotry, racism, and their sophisticated infrastructure to consign entire groups of people to second or third class citizenry; raising the dead by breathing new life into peoples' lives and places where hope has no oxygen.

When I get together with my pastor friends, there still are some among us who like to try to impress the rest of us. You would think by our age we all would be over that. "The mayor of Milwaukee is a member of my congregation," one says. "The chief of surgery at the Cleveland Clinic goes to my church," announces another. "'Jack' from *The Bold and the Beautiful* is on our session." Why do they do that? After all, Jesus said about his little church, "I've got a few fishermen, a Cananean, a tax collector, and a traitor."

I hope you do not mind that I say to my friends, "I've got a church of cracked pots" because I mean it with the highest possible regard. In truth, that is what the mayor of Milwaukee and the head surgeon at the Cleveland Clinic are, too. We are all cracked pots - imperfect, defective, faulty, and flawed - but redeemed, saved, treasured, and used by God to bring God's hope, God's healing, and God's harmony to life in the world. Do not ever discount, disparage, or diminish how God can use your life, broken and cracked as it is, to carry the living water of Jesus Christ to those in need and want of it.

I find in Isaiah a model, an exemplar, for us cracked pots to follow. Isaiah, in a vision, found himself in the throne room of heaven where the Lord was sitting on a throne high and lifted up.

Seraphs were attending the Lord and one called to another and said, *“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of the glory of God.”* The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called and the house filled with smoke. Cracked pot Isaiah cried out, *“Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet, now I have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”*

Just then, one of the seraphs flew to Isaiah holding a live ember that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs and touched Isaiah’s mouth with it, and said to Isaiah, *“Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.”* Then Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord gathering people to minister in his name: *“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”* And Isaiah - imperfect, blemished, cracked pot, Isaiah - but now redeemed of the Lord, answers. Do you remember what he said? *“Here am I. Send me! I will go for you!”*<sup>4</sup>

Jane Laurie Borthwick will take us home today with words from her famous hymn: *“Come, labor on. Cast off all gloomy doubt and faithless fear. No arm so weak but may do service here. Though feeble agents, may we all fulfill God’s righteous will.”*<sup>5</sup>

We are a church of cracked pots *and* we are cherished, redeemed, and used of God. What God has done in us God now does through us. Go, Market Square Church! Go and serve the Lord with gladness.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 6:1-8

<sup>5</sup> Third stanza of the hymn “Come, Labor On” with text by Jane Laurie Borthwick, Glory to God hymnal #719 and the congregation’s closing hymn today.