

“Fragile”  
2 Corinthians 4:6-12  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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As I trust you’ve noticed by now, we are often engaged in a sermon series around here. It is, I think, a helpful way to cover an overarching question or theological theme that has more than one answer or variation...it’s helpful to me, as a preacher, when planning sermons.

And I hope it’s helpful to you, when listening to a sermon.

Next Sunday, my colleagues are going to embark on a new sermon series—I’m a little jealous that I won’t be able to be a part of it. As you may have already heard or read, I will be out for a bit this summer on medical leave following hip replacement surgery.

And I would be remiss, at this moment, if I did not offer a word of thanks:

to you for your prayers,  
and to my splendid colleagues,  
to Leigh and Mary Kathleen and Lauren,  
for being able to so capably fill this pulpit while I’m gone.

I hope you know—I trust you know—just how fortunate y’all are to have Leigh and Mary Kathleen and Lauren here—that in addition to all the other gifts that they bring, they are also very gifted and excellent preachers. And this particular summer, I am especially grateful for their gifts.

So I say all this not only because I want you to be well-informed about your pastor’s whereabouts the next two months. I also mention it because this morning, our text is not part of a sermon series.

Not a part of the previous series.  
Not a part of the next series.

It's not exactly a random text.  
I chose the text from the lectionary readings for today.  
It's a text about the light of God.

And it begins like this:

“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...”

Clay jars—consider that image.

The light that God gives us in Christ is found—  
not in something unbreakable,  
not in something unshakable...  
but in that which could chip or crack or shatter  
very easily.

In other words, according to Paul, the light of God is found in what is fragile.

Now truth be told, fragile is not my favorite word.

When I met with the PT for a pre-op appointment this week, I was answering a bunch of questions...one was about my occupation, and I told her I was a preacher.

You know what she said?  
“You guys are the worst!”

I asked her why.

She said, “You preachers always want to get back to work way too soon, and you’re in danger of putting yourself back on the operating table!”

I promised her I would not make that mistake.  
But it was a nice little reminder of how much I dislike this word...

Fragile.

She was reminding me that after the surgery, I may be a bit fragile.  
Who strives for that which is fragile?

According to our text, it sounds like Paul did exactly that.

“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair...always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.”

Let me be the first to say that while Paul is doing some of his BEST theological work in this text, it is also some of his most CONFUSING theological work.

In what sounds like a very circular argument, Paul keeps talking about death and life and the fragile nature of life in this text.

“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.”

What in the world is Paul trying to say?

Before we go any farther, it might be helpful to remember some of the history and context of Paul’s words.

To whom is Paul writing in today's text?

The Corinthians, good.

And Corinth was a bustling city in a Roman colony at that time.  
Part of the larger Greco-Roman world.

Now I'm no scholar of the Greco-Roman world, but I do know two things that were true about that world:

- a) The Roman Empire spread far and wide, it had vast military might, and it demanded faithfulness and complete allegiance by its subjects. It would have been very easy for those Corinthian Christians to believe that Roman rule and power and oppression was not a fragile thing, but was a NEVER-ENDING thing...
- b) The ancient Greeks held a view of death and the soul that said: our physical bodies die, but our souls are immortal. In other words, there is no ending, no dying for the soul. That too is not a fragile thing. It's an immortal thing. It just goes on and on and on of its own volition. A soul that does not die, and therefore does not need to be raised by the living God.

It would have been very easy for those Corinthian Christians to see the world that way.

A soul without end.

An empire without end.

But to that world-view, Paul says NO!

According to Paul, God will bring an end to all things, and—for the Christian—this is not bad news. God has already begun to do so in Jesus Christ, because in Jesus Christ, God is making all things new.

As Paul sees it, it is in the endings of life,  
the fragile nature of our lives,  
that we are most likely to see the light of Christ.

And let me be the first to admit that's not always easy to see the light of Christ in our fragility and our failings.

I recall a day from the first few months that I was in ministry.

A couple of the men in my first congregation asked if I'd be willing to join their group to make a foursome for a golf tournament later that month, raise some money for charity.

Well...I told them I wasn't any good at golf.

Mini-golf? Yes.

Hitting balls on fairways? Not in my skill-set.

But they said, Aw, it's just a charity tournament. Join us.

They would NOT take no for an answer, so I signed up.

And it was a hot summer day.

And it was Texas.

And I was very careful on summer days in Texas, I always made sure I had sunscreen on, didn't want to get burned.

Twenty minutes or so before the tournament began, I decided I'd better warm up, hit a few balls.

I joined a group of about 15 or so, all lined up practicing their drives.

And I got my driver out. Put the ball on the tee.

And I took my practice swing.

And wouldn't you know it, it just went sailing...problem was, the "it" that went sailing was NOT the ball.

No, the ball stayed right where I had put it on the tee. It was my driver that went flying. All that sunscreen and sweat made my hands so slippery, I lost hold of the club as I swung it.

My driver landed about 20 yards away.

Someone yelled, “EVERYONE: STOP SWINGING!”  
I trotted out in front of all those other golfers to retrieve my club.  
My face was burning red—not from the sun, but from embarrassment.

I played 18 holes of golf that day, and I held onto every golf club that I swung the rest of that afternoon.

You know what I’ve never done since that day?  
Played another 18 holes.

You see, it’s been over 25 years, but when it comes to hitting a golf ball off a tee, my EGO is still a bit fragile...

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But we can’t always run from that which is fragile.

**How are you doing, these days, with what is fragile in your life?**

**How are you doing, these days, with the endings in your life?**

Maybe you’ve reached the end of a particular season of life:

- Maybe your youngest child is heading to college this fall, and you and your spouse will be empty-nesters. How are you doing with that?

- You're newly retired, and it was time, and you look forward to the newfound freedom, but you're also filled with mixed emotions, and a few questions:

What does your future have in store?

Will there be new ways for you to feel useful?

Will your money hold out?

Will your health hold out?

“But we have this treasure in clay jars...

[in other words, something that could break,  
something that could end]

...so that it may be clear that this extraordinary power  
belongs to God and does not come from us.”

Please don't misunderstand.

I'm not saying that everything that breaks or cracks or shatters is ordained by God, or that every ending comes from God.

But I do think that Paul wants us to be very clear: in what's fragile no less than in what is strong, God will be at work, in ways you and I do not always imagine that God will be at work.

I wonder if any of you know the name Henri Landwirth.

Henri Landwirth was a Jew who survived the atrocities of the Nazis as a teenage boy. He lost most of his family in the concentration camps, but he survived—even though he ended up being housed in 7 different camps during the war.

After the war, there was a day when Henri—then 19 years old—was walking along a river in Europe, and he came upon a young German boy.

Henri felt nothing but hatred for this child.

The kid was wearing the uniform of the Hitler Jurgens, Hitler's youth organization.

Henri told the kid to take off his uniform.

Said Henri, "I wanted to hurt him in some way. I wanted to do to him what they had done to me."

But then, from somewhere, Henri had the thought that he did not want to be like them.

"I did not want to become what I despised," he said.

He released the boy and told him to run.

Eventually, Henri Landwirth made his way to the United States and reinvented himself as a hotel manager. He became extraordinarily successful. During the space race of the 1950s and 60s, when astronauts were training in Florida, Henri Landwirth owned and operated hotels that astronauts like John Glenn stayed in.

By the 1980s, he had made himself a wealthy man.

Then in 1986, a wish-granting organization called Henri and asked if a little girl named Amy might come to stay at one of his hotels during her trip to meet Mickey Mouse.

Henri said of course.



But Amy had a terminal illness, and she never made it.  
 It was an experience that shook Henri Landwirth.  
 And he decided to do something about it.

Since his own life was threatened as a child, he decided to build a place for kids with life-threatening illnesses.

A place where they could just have fun with their families.  
 He called it Give Kids the World.<sup>1</sup>

It's located outside of Orlando.  
 And when kids go on wish-granting trips to Disney, they can stay at this place.

Give Kids the World is designed with kids in mind.  
 A water park. A merry-go-round.  
 A mini-golf course.  
 An ice cream store that begins serving at 7:30am.

When you check into your room at Give Kids the World, you learn that the large room, with the adjoining and very large bathroom—that belongs to the kids.

Parents...they get the smaller room with the bathroom down the hall.

Now the reason I learned about Henri Landwirth is that our family received the generous gift of staying at Give Kids the World a little more than a decade ago.

It's a place where you come face to face with the fact  
 that for some families, there are endings that arrive  
 way, way too soon.

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Halamandaris, *Love and Hate: The Story of Henri Landwirth*, 2007.

But I will swear to my dying day that in this facility where so much is fragile...

fragile families, fragile health—  
the light of God is everywhere!

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Do you know any places like that?  
A place filled with what is fragile, and the light of God is everywhere?

It's one of the reasons I look forward to being here with you every Sunday.

I think this room, every Sunday, is a place like that.

Because whatever ending you're facing right now,  
in the broken vessel, the clay jar that is your life,  
I can see it!

The light of Christ that is shining through you.

Amen.