

Genesis 2: 4b-9
2 Corinthians 4: 6-12
October 19, 2014
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

This summer we had a conversation with a friend who we really respect. He cares about so many of the same things we care about and has courageously set aside all seeking of financial security in order to be spiritually and emotionally free to promote the health of humanity and the planet. This man was brought up in the church but is not a Christian and is not drawn to a community of faith. Nevertheless the conversation was going along swimmingly. We were a little community operating on Lucy of Peanut's motto: "If everyone agreed with me they'd be right."

As sometimes happens, however, just when you think everything is just groovy something goes wrong. Tottering on the brink of a vision that would forever transform our world into one governed by peace and love, Mj said, "And that is why the church is so important." Our friend, without skipping a beat countered, "The church is part of the problem."

Ouch! We were stunned. This friend knows that we have devoted our lives to the church and supporting its efforts to be a positive force in the world. And yet it must be said that from the outside at least, the church is hardly perceived as positive presence to many people for all kinds of reasons. When I was growing up the most common comment I heard was, "I don't go to church because it is full of hypocrites." In the 1960's and 70's, when many churches were actively engaged in the civil rights movement and opposition to the Vietnam War, the church was accused of abandoning its mission for "politics". Beginning in the 80's the very voices which were condemning the church for being engaged politics developed a "Christian" political

agenda. Suddenly the church was perceived as an organization advocating against abortion, and “family values” which specifically targeted gay, lesbian and transgender people. In response to this other churches responded by advocating the opposite position. The result has been the evolution of communities of faith which either overtly or subtly are groups of homogeneous like-minded people each of whom believes it is practicing the *true faith* of Jesus.

Now, when asked why they don’t go to church an increasing number, especially young people, give the reason that church is full of angry, narrow minded people who are more interested in moral purity than living the Gospel. To the extent that they still recognize Jesus, they see him lost in the midst of “culture wars” and concern for right belief and pure moral behavior than the grace that welcomes sinners. Compounding this view is the scandalous reports of clergy sexual misconduct and denominational cover-ups.

In a world where children are growing up literally ignorant of the Bible and the story of Jesus, the public behavior of the church at least as presented in public media *is indeed very much a part of the problem.*

It is no surprise that as membership in churches declines and polls and pundits predict the end of the institutional church in a matter of decades, those of us who participate in communities of faith wonder, “Are we riding on the Titanic?” “Are we a dying breed?” Has the church irretrievably lost its power to awaken hope in Jesus Christ?” Are the atheist materialists right and there is no God and the only reality is that we can see, taste, touch, and which satisfies our rational need for proof?” Are we a bunch of hypocritical do-gooders who may be tolerated but not taken seriously? Are we a refuge from the uncertainty of life and what seems

to be the loss of moral standards? Do we seek to become enclaves of light living in fear of the world's darkness who survive by reinforcing our beliefs against those of the world around us?

I suppose that there are dimensions of the life of all churches which reflect these attitudes. However, in the main, my answer to these questions is a resounding "No!" We are *not* a dying breed. We have *not* lost our power to awaken the hope that is ours in Jesus Christ. There is so much more than what we can perceive with our senses and understand with our intellects. Ok, so we may be a bunch of hypocritical do-gooders. But if the world contained more of us it would be a much better place. And while we seek to lift up God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ we are not closed to the world or fearful of it.

Why? Because of one simple fact. God. God created the heavens and the earth not in some impersonal big bang but as an explosion of creative love. God literally could not contain himself. And having created a universe of endless variety and ongoing creative dynamism, God still was not satisfied. His love yearned for a creature independent of him yet made in his likeness to appreciate and explore this amazing creation. God yearned for a creature who would wake up in the morning and say, "*WOW!!! What a beautiful world! What a gift to be alive! I did not make this. Heck, I did not make myself! I wonder who did?*" God sought a being who would love the creation and extend God's creativity by creating things which would improve the life of all creatures.

Thus we read in Genesis that God took a mound of earth and fashioned it into the form of a new creation. However as a form this molded clay was just that—what we call a stature. But then God did something else. He breathed his life into that figure of clay. The figure became transformed into a living breathing extension of the life of God. When the Bible says that God

created women and men in God's image, one way to understand what the phrase means is this: God created human beings to become extensions of his love and creativity in creation.

God intended that we would recognize that we did not make ourselves. The clay frame in which we are born and which houses the spirit of God will eventually grow old and die. But the life of God which dwells in all people lives forever. It is the life that the container we call the body is meant to contain and indeed to be the true life force in each human being.

Paul in the passage we heard from 2 Corinthians puts it perfectly: "... we hold this treasure in fragile clay jars so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power comes from God and not us." Paul applies this description not only to individuals, but—and this is critical—to communities of people. "*We hold* this treasure in fragile clay jars so that it made be made clear that this extraordinary power comes from God and *not us*. The community of faith called the church exists to point beyond itself to the power of God given to us in creation and reclaimed in us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The world looks with increasing skepticism on people who gather in communities like ours which profess to be vessels of the living God. They hold us accountable for the words we say and never tire of pointing out the gap between our words and our actions. And we have a choice. We can water down our standards and become a group of relatively nice people who don't expect to have much of an impact on the world and avoid offending anyone. *Or*, we can boldly proclaim God's great vision for the world revealed in Jesus Christ and seek to make this treasure known not so much with our words but with the way we try to live intentionally according to the Gospel.

Option one is more comfortable but is the major reason why the church is seen by so many to be irrelevant. Option two is to risk becoming visible as a community who individually and collectively place following Jesus the highest priority in our lives. The world may call us hypocrites or fanatics. Yet I suspect behind every skeptic is a deep yearning that what we seek to nourish among us and share with the world is something real. Never has the need for this treasure in fragile clay jars been more needed.

Never have foolish people like us been more necessary. Amen