

“Treasure in Earthen Vessels”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
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Text: “But we have this treasure in clay jars, to that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us” (II Corinthians 4:7).

Several months ago William Willimon wrote an article for the *Christian Century* entitled “First Year Bishop.” In that article he reflected on the transition he had undergone from being the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University to being a Bishop of the United Methodist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. In that article Willimon recalled preaching his last sermon at the Duke Chapel. A student came up to him after the sermon and asked him, “Dr. Willimon, will you be doing much preaching in your new job?” Willimon said beaming, “I sure will. I will be preaching two or three times every Sunday.”

“That’s good,” said the student, “I’ve heard that your sermons are poorly organized and hard to follow, so maybe you will have the time to be able to work on your preaching.”

Willimon was naturally taken back by the brutal honesty of the student. “Who said that about my sermons?” he demanded.

“Everybody at Duke,” replied the student.

Finally, Willimon said that after he had regained his composure somewhat he said to the student, “Look kid, would you be willing to move to Birmingham? I am going to be a Bishop and a lot of people are going to be cozying up to me for favors, and I need someone to tell me the truth.”

I.

In his letter to the Church at Corinth the Apostle Paul deals with one of the most difficult problems imaginable—a church that is rent asunder by a series of divisions. The church had aligned itself in cliques, each one allied with a particular pastor. One group was aligned with the

disciple “Cephas” (Peter). Others were attracted to a brilliant orator named Apollos. There was also a group that was loyal to “Paul,” while another was called the “Christ” party.

There were other scandals as well. The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper was violated when wealthy people would not eat with the poor (I Corinthians 11). There was dissension over “spiritual gifts.” Certain individuals were “speaking in tongues” and exercising other gifts as a way of lording themselves over other members of the church. There was sexual misconduct as well. A man was sleeping with his stepmother (I Corinthians 5:1).

II.

Today, we find ourselves also in a troubling position. The so-called mainline Protestant churches (Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopalian, and Lutheran) are all facing serious problems. They are facing large membership declines. They are divided on issues of human sexuality: abortion and homosexuality.

Several years ago Jack Marcum, the Director of the Research Services of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), pointed out that our denomination is dwindling into a large number of small congregations. There are approximately 11,000 congregations in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Almost half of these churches (5,500) have less than a hundred members. These churches do not have the resources to support a full-time minister. Marcum points out that there is not a shortage of ministers in the Presbyterian Church. We have 14,000 ministers. There is a shortage of members.

In his letter to the Church at Corinth the Apostle Paul points out that we have this treasure in “earthen vessels” (clay pots). It was common in the ancient world to store wealth in this type of clay vessels. Often they held precious rugs and jewels. But the recipients of Paul’s letter understood the difference between the “treasure” and the vessels in which they were stored.

That is true in the church as well. Earthen vessels are always imperfect, easily broken and constantly in need of repair. They never quite do justice to the splendor of the treasure they hold. As Christians we believe that the treasure is Jesus Christ, who is “the same yesterday, today, and forever.” But we have never been quite as confident about the vessel as about the treasure. Sometimes Christians have equated the vessel with the treasure, forgetting that the vessel is of this earth and therefore imperfect. At other times we have assumed that we could have the treasure independently of the vessel, thereby making the vessel unnecessary.

In the Reformed Church we have always struggled with the tension between the ideal and the real. The church is a human institution. It is made up of imperfect people. Yet, Christ has given to the church the “keys to the kingdom” and promised us that not even the “gates of hell can prevail against it.” The spirit of the Reformed or Presbyterian Church was always contained in five Latin words: “Ecclesia Reformata sed Semper Reformanda”—the church reformed but always being reformed. In other words, the reformation of the church is not a one-time event, but an event that continues to unfold.

So what are the elements of the renewal of the church?

III.

The first is a recovery of the theology that shaped the life of the Presbyterian Church in this country and throughout the world. Dr. John Leith in his book *An Introduction to the Reformed Tradition* points out that our theology has always emphasized the “majesty of God.” The God whom we worship is not a small or trivial God, but he is the Lord God, who “comes with might,” “who has measured the waters in the hollows of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span,” before whom “the nations are as nothing” (Isaiah 40: 10,12, 17). The God we worship is not our “friend” nor our “pal.” He is the creator of the universe. Therefore in our worship there is a certain formality, reverence, and distance that reminds us that there is a great distinction between the “creator” and the “creature.”

Theology in the Presbyterian or Reformed tradition has always been theocentric. It centers on the God who is the creator of the universe and who is uniquely present in Jesus Christ.

Because we believe in the majesty and sovereignty of God, we do not put our trust in anything that is less than God. The theocentric characteristic of our faith sets it over against every ethic of self-realization, against the inordinate concern with the salvation of one’s soul.

The Presbyterian or Reformed faith has also placed a great deal of emphasis on the “uniqueness of Jesus Christ.” Several years ago a Presbyterian minister by the name of Dick Ficca preached a sermon at the Peacemaking Conference that he entitled “What’s the Big Deal About Jesus?” In that sermon he echoed what a large number of people in our society today are saying. They believe that Jesus is simply one religious figure among many. Many people today believe that all religions are the same and that Jesus, Moses, Mohammed, Confucius, and many of the other great leaders of the world are one and the same.

The Presbyterian Church has historically affirmed that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is God’s final revelation. Jesus is not simply one revelation of God among many. The church affirms that insofar as it is possible to know God, we know God in Jesus Christ. God’s revelation in Jesus Christ is the one revelation of God by which every other revelation of God must be tested.

IV.

The second element that is necessary for the renewal of the church is a recovery of the mission of the church. In 1975 John Fry, a Presbyterian minister in Chicago, wrote a book he entitled *The Trivialization of the United Presbyterian Church*. In that book he criticized the church for losing sight of its mission. It pointed out that the church had become a bureaucracy that was concerned with its own life. It was constantly restructuring itself. Restructure had become an end instead of a means to an end. Representation had become the driving force in every decision.

There are several key components to this recovery of mission. The first is the recovery of the first great end of the church “the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of human kind.” There is nothing more critical for the life of the church than the fulfillment of the “Great Commission” of Christ to “go into all the world, baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, preaching and teaching what Christ has taught us” (Matthew 28).

Central to this mission is building up churches through worship and preaching, Christian education, pastoral care, and outreach. It is also critical that the Presbyterian Church (USA) today build new churches. From 1946-1968 Mecklenburg Presbytery organized thirty-two new churches. In the past thirty-eight years we have built only five new churches and closed two for a net gain of three. In 1980, 7.6 per cent of all the residents of Mecklenburg County were Presbyterian. Today that number is less than 4 percent.

But there is another aspect of the mission of the church. Today, in the city of Charlotte we are facing a number of great challenges. The number of homeless people in our community is growing. This past week there were not enough places in the Women’s Shelter for the women and children who were facing cold weather without a home.

Another challenge before us is the widening gap between rich and poor in our community. This week our church will be home to a group of families as part of the Family Promise program. On Friday we will begin the “Room in the Inn,” which will shelter families in our church for two nights a week during the winter months. This summer we will again host the Freedom School that is an outreach to children in our community who struggle to have any chance of success in life.

The upshot of this, of course, is that First Presbyterian Church is a church that can make a difference. Can you imagine what would happen in Charlotte if the membership of this church took a vow to use the people and financial resources at our disposal to change the face of Charlotte: to insure adequate housing for the poor, to guarantee that our school system would be adequate for every child, to bear witness to the love of Christ so that we would fulfill our baptism vows to “make a society safe for its children?”

Jesus has called us to be the “light of the world.” All around us is darkness and yet there is light as well.

“If not Charlotte, North Carolina, then where?

If not First Presbyterian Church, then who?

If not now, then when?”

Amen!