

In the early 1900's, the Coca-Cola Bottling Company was suffering from two connected problems – the rapidly growing popularity of the soft drink, and the number of competitors who were attempting to rip off the product using clever branding. Companies such as Koka-Nola, Ma Coca-Co, Toka-Cola and even Koke Cola were putting their beverages in the same, square glass bottles, causing a huge headache for the franchise bottlers of Coke and the home office in Atlanta.

Reaching out to its legal team in 1912, Coca Cola proposed that everyone associated with the company come up with a distinctive package to separate the product from its competitors. Coca Cola's legal team challenged the bottlers to develop a bottle so distinct that you would recognize it by feel in the dark or lying broken on the ground.– a challenge which was embraced by many of glass companies, including the Root Glass Company in Terry Haute, Indiana. Using the shape of the coca bean as inspiration, the company developed a unique bottle with ribs and an elongated shape. When the contest was over the Root Company won the contract and was ordered by Coke to color the glass “German Green.” The bottle became so successful that Coke drove all of its competitors out of the market and embedded the shape, the color, and the label in the global psyche, where it still exists today.

As I read our text last week from 2 Corinthians 4, a phrase from the history of the Coca-Cola bottle came to mind: a shape so distinct “that you would recognize it by feel in the dark or lying broken on the ground.” Can you hear why I made that connection? “And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not proclaim

ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. 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, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us."

To understand Paul's words, we must understand the situation in Corinth that prompted the writing of 2nd Corinthians. In Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, we learned that the congregation had split into factions over practice, belief, and leadership. Several groups were claiming spiritual superiority over others. One group in Corinth was the legalists – a group of Jewish Christians who did not want to give up their legalistic roots in the Mosaic laws of Judaism or its ritual practices, such as the required dietary laws and circumcision. Paul later made a visit to Corinth, which resulted in a very critical letter to the congregation which was defensive in nature and poorly received by the members. This lost letter opened the doors of the church to an unknown group of "false apostles," who came from Jerusalem to Corinth to support the legalistic faction. The "false apostles" tried to use Paul as an example of why the Corinthian churches needed to embrace the law of Moses and Moses himself as equal to the gospel of Christ. Upon hearing this news, Paul writes 2nd Corinthians – a response to these events which represents Paul's despair at his failure to explain both himself and the nature of his ministry, to this beloved church.

These false apostles also justify declaring the law of Moses as equal to the gospel of Christ through the fact that Moses could visit with the physical shape of God, whereas those under Moses' leadership could only see the light of God through their own veiled faces. Paul had shared with the Corinthians the story of his conversion, in which the light

of God was shown to him in the shape of Jesus Christ. According to the false teachers, since Moses and Paul had both experienced the physical presence of God, the law declared by Moses was equal in authority to the gospel of Christ declared by Paul. Paul responds to this twisted logic by using a metaphor, telling the Corinthians that it is not the vessel in which the treasure is kept, but the treasure itself that matters. Paul describes the light of the gospel as this “treasure,” but he follows by saying that it is a treasure that resides in the crudest of clay jars, meaning himself and any other human heart.

The image of the clay jar is important to Paul because of its significance in the Old Testament. In Jeremiah, God gives the prophet a vision in which Jeremiah sees a potter working with clay on a spinning wheel. Have you ever seen a craftsperson working with clay on a potter’s wheel? Even from the time of Jeremiah the process is still the same – the clay is pulled, pushed, and shaped to the artist’s desires. Sometimes the clay is torn apart and reworked. It is twisted, mashed, spun and shaped until it is ready for the kiln, then it is heated until it is ready to hold the contents for which it has been formed.

Paul saw himself not as the embodiment of God’s glory, but only a crude, cracked, and broken vessel for it. For Paul, the true and only glory of God is in the gospel of Christ, which reveals the Savior not in the form of a regent, a prophet, the law, religion, or an apostle, but in the form that we see on the cross – torn, beaten, nailed and tortured for our salvation. Paul sees his own suffering and struggle as a reflection of Christ’s suffering, and declares that all who follow and believe in Jesus Christ place themselves on the same potter’s wheel. For Paul, Christians declare the glory of the Lord not through their power, their treasure, or their gifts, but through their faith – a faith that continues after

everything else has been stripped away; a faith that dwells in our hearts “in spite of,” not “because of.”

The great Anglican church leader, Bishop N.T. Wright, reflected upon the gift of our brokenness in regards to the task of declaring the good news of Christ in his book, “The Challenge of Jesus”: *Our task as image-bearing, God-loving, Christ-shaped, Spirit-filled Christians, following Christ and shaping our world, is to announce redemption to a world that has discovered its fallenness, to announce healing to a world that has discovered its brokenness, to proclaim love and trust to a world that knows only exploitation, fear and suspicion.* Like Paul, NT Wright understands that it is not the beauty of our lives, but the content, that shapes us. If that content is the gospel of Jesus Christ, it also shapes the world as we declare with our words and with our lives that in the midst of suffering there is presence, in the midst of failure there is grace, in the midst of despair there is hope, and in the midst of death there is life.

God only places the content of salvation into clay pots that have been spun, shaken, twisted, and baked, then uses them to pour out the love of Christ into the empty lives of this world. CS Lewis wrote, *The mold in which a key is made would be a strange thing, if you had never seen a key: and the key itself a strange thing if you had never seen a lock. Your soul has a curious shape because it is a hollow made to fit a particular swelling in the infinite contours of the divine substance, or a key to unlock one of the doors in the house with many mansions.* Christ shapes us as Christ needs us, using us for his benefit, not ours. It is a distinct shape, more distinct than even a Coke bottle – more recognized, but filled with so much more than just a fizzy liquid. It is the shape of a cross, filled with love. A love that fills lives, not bottles. And when God takes us from the potter’s wheel, it is ours to share.