

## Treasures in Clay Jars

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Good Morning and Happy Mother's Day! Please pray with me: Dear God, I ask now that you open our hearts and our minds and fill us with your holy spirit as we listen for your word this day. Amen.

I grew up attending First Presbyterian Church of West Chester, PA. Every year in the spring we celebrated Youth Sunday when the entire service was led by the youth. When I was a senior in high school, I was asked to give the sermon. Today, almost 19 years ago to the day, I find myself once again in the pulpit. Over twice as old, hopefully twice as wise, I'm going to speak to you about faith. Some of my words will be the same as they were almost two decades ago because, as I read through that old sermon, I realized my 37-year-old self could learn something from my 18 year-old self.

Faith. It is a word we hear often in our lives as Christians. But what exactly is faith? Hebrews 11:1 says, "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." To what extent do we believe that? To what extent do we live that? Are we always faithful or do we sometimes go astray from what we truly believe? How does our faith as Christians affect our faith in others-our friends, partners, our children, and perhaps most importantly, ourselves? What do we do when our faith is shaken? Hear now the word of God as written in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, in second Corinthians chapter four verses seven through eighteen (NIV):

**But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair, persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.**

**It is written; "I believed; therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence." All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.**

**Therefor we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."**

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

What a wonderful and important message Paul gives to us. He compares us to jars of clay by saying, "We are hard pressed on every side but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck

down, but not destroyed.” As a young mother, my immediate response is, “that’s great Paul, but have you met my children?” You better believe I’m hard pressed-literally, often by little feet wielding great strength on both sides of my body while I try to capture the elusive creature known as sleep. I am absolutely perplexed as I find myself saying this such as: I’m sorry that the fact your banana broke and I can’t stick it back together and you don’t want a new one, you want this one, and now the world as you know it is totally over. Perplexing, yes. The truth is, as parents, especially mothers, we sometimes do feel crushed, in despair, abandoned, and maybe even destroyed. There is no denying the fact that parenthood is arguably the most challenging job ever created. That mothers experience the highest of highs and the lowest in lows, often in a matter of minutes.

Before we dive deeper into the meaning of Paul’s words, I’d like to share a little about my personal faith journey. I grew up attending First Presbyterian Church of West Chester, Pennsylvania. We attended regularly during my school years and I was lucky to have had a positive initial exposure to Christianity Throughout Junior High and High school I continued to explore my faith in different ways. Some of my experiences reinforced my belief that God exists, others left me questioning everything and with a funny feeling that something wasn’t quite right about certain so called “Christian” groups.

Then, in November of 1997 I was diagnosed with severe clinical depression and anxiety. Although talking to doctors and dealing with teachers and friends was difficult, the most difficult and challenging battle I fought was the internal one. I couldn’t understand why I, this person with straight A’s, wonderful friends, and the most supportive loving family couldn’t stop crying. How someone who could lead 250 people in the marching band and play music in front of judges and huge audiences was suddenly afraid to get out of bed. This person who was always in control could no longer control anything. It was in dealing with all of this that I had my first profound encounter with God’s power.

One night, I lay in bed struggling to calm myself down, slow my pounding heart, and fall asleep. Completely exhausted both physically and mentally, I prayed, “God, I cannot do this anymore. I’m scared, I’m tired, I’m confused, and I cannot handle this alone. Please help me.” I was filled with warmth and a wonderful peace, my heart slowed, and I fell asleep. I wish I could say that my struggles with depression and anxiety were short lived, but the truth is that 21 years and an equal number of medications later, they continue. I even threw in a diagnosis of OCD in the summer of 2012 for good measure! You see I have what I like to call a “sticky brain.” My mind likes to get stuck on a particular thought and obsess over it. I was spared postpartum depression after Aria was born, but experienced it as so many women do, after Julianna’s birth.

Paul’s words seem to be full of contradictions. On one hand we’re hard pressed, almost broken, on the other hand we’re strong. We are wasting away on the outside, but still renewed and hopeful inside. I was recently speaking with a brand-new mother. I asked how she was doing. Her words said fine, but her face had a look I recognized. I didn’t want to overwhelm her with lots of advice, so I just said this: It’s really hard, in fact sometimes it’s awful. And it’s the most wonderful, incredible feeling in the world. But it really hard and that’s ok. It’s ok to not enjoy all of it. Feeling conflicting emotions is normal.

Here's what I'm continually trying to remember: to be a good parent you don't have to have all the answers. To be a good Christian you don't have to have all the answers. In fact, we're not supposed to. That's tough, especially given the number of questions parents field daily. Imagine if as mother's we could let go of the often-subconscious set of high standards to which we hold ourselves?

As mothers and Christians, it's common to feel like outwardly we're wasting away. The pressure put on today's mothers is intensified by the lovely invention of social media. Make sure you're feeding your children enough organic food. Get them outside for at least 30 minutes a day. Don't you dare nurse them to sleep and never, EVER get into their crib with them or they'll never sleep alone. So, the question is, how do we renew ourselves day by day? I want to cry out, "How Paul? How do I remain hopeful? How do I figure out who I am as a mother, wife, woman, and member of society? I think Paul gives us some guidance on how to do this. In fact, he very well may be talking about mindfulness. Mindfulness is a term we hear a lot about today the goal of which is to practice acknowledging thoughts and then letting them go. Paul writes that we have these treasures in jars of clay. If we think of our bodies as the jars, perhaps the treasures are our gifts and talents, insights, health, and our ability to love. He advises us to fix our eyes not on what is seen, for what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. When we stay in the moment, come back to the breath which is our life force, we allow the Holy Spirit that is within each one of us to emerge. Truly living our lives to the fullest doesn't mean we have to be overwhelmingly ecstatic every second of every day. But if we stay grounded and fully present, even in the moments from which we want to run- when the children are screaming, the baby wakes for the tenth time, you fight with your partner- when you acknowledge those feelings, then let them go, you are being *exactly* who God wants you to be at that moment. Then the questions change from who am I and what am I supposed to do, to can I be content with the unknown and trust that God *does* know. Can I embrace what Paul writes are light and momentary troubles in the grand scheme of things? That's easier said than done. Recently I took a proverbial leap of faith and quit my part-time work-from-home job. My bank account is lighter, but so is my heart.

I've always considered myself someone who feels everything. While it's true that I am indeed an empath, I've found that myself, and probably many others, often engage in behaviors that prevent us from feeling. As soon as the first feelings of anxiety or depression, or those unwanted thoughts start to creep in we distract ourselves. Whether it's by food, or technology, or shifting our focus to caring for someone else, we keep ourselves busy to avoid feeling. This, in turn, fuels the negative feelings we were trying to escape in the first place. That's why mindfulness is so important. You are not your thoughts and guess what? Just because you think or feel something doesn't mean it's true. Let me say that again because it's important. Just because you think or feel something doesn't mean it's true.

Practicing mindfulness allows one's self to create space for the uncomfortable, experience it, and give it to God. For me, mindfulness is a form of prayer. I've always found it hard to pray. This is often how it works for me, "Dear God, thank you for everything you have blessed me with. Thank you for my healthy children. Did I pack Aria's lunch? Oh my gosh Julianna never had a true breakfast. Oh shoot. Thank you, God, for food. For giving me strength, how is Julianna so strong? Note to self, start weight training to keep up with one year old.... etc.

etc. etc. By practicing mindfulness, we are practicing our faith by letting God in. Maybe we don't have to focus on words, we just need to be still and open.

I'm excited to announce a new group I'll be facilitating beginning this summer called "Safe Space." The group's goal is to provide a place where members of the church and community can come to safely discuss the struggles of living in today's world. Members are welcome to share, or just sit quietly and listen. It will be a place to support and empower each other in our daily lives. We've been speaking about radical hospitality to others. Let's also practice being radically hospitable to ourselves.

In closing, I'd like to share one more story with you. When I was in high school I had an acquaintance, who had overcome difficulties with substance abuse. As her graduation project she implemented a chapter of the Yellow Ribbon Group, a group formed when a young boy committed suicide after breaking up with his girlfriend. The purpose of the group was to provide people a yellow card with a yellow ribbon attached to it. The card explained the idea-if you find yourself in a situation you can't handle and need help, simply untie the ribbon and give it to someone. She gave a card to every student so they each had a yellow ribbon-a way to communicate without using words if they needed help.

Remember Paul's instructions and fix your eyes on what is unseen, in your own life and within others. Please remember that there are so many people in this church who would love to hear about where you are in your faith journey. If you need to, hand your "invisible yellow ribbon" to our deacons, ministers, or the person sitting next to you. Come to our Safe Space group. For we are listening. Finally, please remember to give your "yellow ribbons" to God through prayer, mindfulness, and worship. Mothers, the love we have for our children is fierce and unconditional and so is God's love for us. Remember He is always there, ever faithful, at 2 AM as you sit crying with your baby and on the day you send your first born to college. He is the greatest listener of all....and guess what? He is listening right now. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.