

“The Product, Not the Packaging”

“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.”

In the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, the title character and his father are on a quest to find the Holy Grail, traditionally thought to be the cup that Jesus Christ drank from at the Last Supper, and that Joseph of Arimathea used to collect Jesus’ blood at his crucifixion. While there is no proof that the cup from the Last Supper survived after the meal, the Holy Grail became a popular theme in medieval literature; some legends claim that Joseph of Arimathea brought the Grail to Glastonbury, England, and that one the spot where he buried it the water turns red because it travels through Christ’s blood (although scientists agree that this is merely the effect of red iron oxide in the soil). Legends hold that the Grail had the power to heal all wounds, deliver eternal youth and grant everlasting happiness. *“Since the inception of these widespread tales, countless travelers, scientists, historians and archeologists have attempted lofty quests to recover the Holy Grail”* (www.history.com).

In the movie, Indiana and his father are racing against a group of Nazi scientists in their quest for the Holy Grail, which their adversaries believe will assist them in their quest for world domination. When they find the temple where the Grail is kept, Indiana safely overcomes three protective booby traps and reaches the Grail’s chamber, which has been guarded by a knight who has been kept alive for seven hundred years through the power of the Grail. But Indiana then discovers that the true Grail is hidden among dozens of false Grails; only the true Grail brings life, while a false Grail will claim it. When Elsa, one of Indiana’s Nazi adversaries, reaches the inner chamber pointing a pistol at Indiana and the knight, she purposely selects a golden chalice studded with emeralds and hands it to her companion Donovan, who scoops up water and drinks for the cup he believes will give him eternal life. But the appearance of this chalice is misleading; because it is a false Grail, Donovan rapidly ages into dust and expires. No longer held at gunpoint, Indiana selects a simple pewter cup, which he identifies as “the chalice of a carpenter.” This is, of course, the true Holy Grail, which brings healing to Indiana’s wounded father.

While the legend of the Holy Grail has no bearing on our faith in Jesus Christ or on the Sacrament of Holy Communion that he instituted at the Last Supper, it serves as a reminder to us that it is *the product, not the packaging* that is most important. While many churches have beautiful communion sets that grace their altars, it is what the communion ware contains that is the object of our attention when we come to the Lord’s Table. We don’t focus on the plate and cup – no matter if they are from an ordinary dinner table or from a magnificent cathedral – but on the blessing that they bear to us: the body and blood of Christ, given and shed for us and for all people for the forgiveness of sins. When we gather at the Table of the Lord, it is the product – the Lord’s Supper – and not the packaging that is most important.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul once again addresses a congregation that has turned its attention from battling each other to questioning the authenticity of Paul’s apostolic ministry. As anyone who has been the object of unfair accusations can testify, Paul has been deeply hurt by the negativity that has been directed toward him, and you can hear the pain in his words addressed to a people with whom he has spent a considerable period of time. Among the challenges Paul is facing are from a group he refers to as “super-apostles,” whose alleged superiority is casting Paul in an unfavorable light (*“I think that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles.”* – 11:5). These “super-apostles”

appear to be a group of false teachers who appeared to be superior to Paul in their manner and authority (*"I may be untrained in speech, but not in knowledge; certainly in every way and in all things we have made this evident to you."* – 11:6). While Paul uses the term "super-apostles" facetiously, their impressive rhetorical skills present a packaging that is as appealing as a jewel-encrusted Grail. But Paul knows that while their outward appearance may be impressive, the message they carry is false and a danger to the true Gospel that Paul proclaims: *"The reason Paul chose to defend himself was not to retain his personal honor but so that nothing would detract from the gospel that he preached."* (www.gotquestions.org). For Paul, the proof of the authenticity of his message is that it is contained not in an outwardly impressive package, but one that is most humble so that all the focus is on what it contains, not on the one who bears it: *"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."* (4:7). In the ancient world "clay jars" (also translated "earthen vessels") were purely utilitarian; if they broke, they were not repaired but thrown away. They might be compared to "take-out" containers from local restaurants, its that are not valued for their own beauty or worth but simply function to bring our dinner from the restaurant to our tables. *"So grand a treasure borne in such a menial, frail, seemingly inept container makes it unmistakable that the power enabling the whole enterprise is 'from God and not from us.'"* (J. Paul Sampley). In his ministry, it is the message that he shares – the treasure that is the Gospel of Jesus Christ – that is of primary importance; Paul is merely the bearer of this treasure, the earthen vessel through which the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord is shared with all people.

So that there might be no mistake that it is the message and not the messenger that is of primary importance, Jesus teaches his disciples that their role in sharing the Gospel will be different from others who place themselves at the center of their message. When James and John have the audacity to demand that Jesus *"grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."* (Mark 10:37). Not only does Jesus rebuke the brothers for the lack of understanding of the true nature of discipleship, but uses this as a teaching moment for all his disciples as to how they will be send forth to serve in Jesus' name:

- *"You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."* – Mark 10:42-45.

In his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul contrasted their place in society with others with more prominent status to prove again that it is the message and not the messenger that is at the center of the Church's proclamation of the Gospel:

- *"Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many of you were powerful, not many of you were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what was weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing the things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God."* – 1 Corinthians 1:26-29.

For many people outside of the Church, its message was "foolishness" because it was often shared in humble surroundings by people who lacked the charisma and rhetorical skills of the leaders of other traditions in the ancient world. But Paul's message is that it is not the manner in which the message is

delivered, nor the place in which it is being shared, that matters; as no one would focus their attention on the clay pot that contained the product, neither should anyone focus on those who are called to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the product not the packaging, that matters; it is the message and not the messenger that is of fundamental importance. As a candle stand exists to be the bearer of light, so do we let the light of Christ that we bear shine before others *“so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”* (Matthew 5:16).

Because we are the “clay jars” that are called to bear the priceless treasure of God’s Holy Word, we can live as people who have been freed from the need to strive to impress others, or “get to the top,” or to achieve a level of success as defined by others. Our success comes not from what we might achieve on our own, but on what God does through us to accomplish God’s Will. Henri Nouwen refers to this freedom as “displacement,” which leads us away from the burden of having to succeed on our own to being instruments of God’s saving grace.

- “Voluntary displacement unmasks the illusion that we have to ‘make it to the top’ and offers us a glimpse of a deeper spiritual reality... For many people, displacement means persevering faithfully in their unspectacular daily life, leaving grand fantasies aside to be faithful to their ministry in the marketplace. For others, it means leaving their jobs and security in a voluntary act of downward mobility in order to be free for ministry ... When I stand in the presence of the Lord with empty hands, as a useless servant, I become aware of my basic dependence and my deep need for grace.” – *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith*.

We are here today because of all of the “earthen vessels” who bore God’s Word to others throughout the generations. While there are the famous servants of God whose name endure the test of time (St. Paul, St. Augustine, St. Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer), most of these bearers of God’s grace lived quiet lives that were soon forgotten. But while their names may have been lost in the sands of time, the message they bore as faithful “jars of clay” endures. There were the instruments of grace who God used to accomplish God’s Will in their generation, and because of their faithful bearing of this priceless treasure we too have this good news that is the word of life and salvation. These earthen vessels may have appeared to be of little worth, but what they shared endures for all generations. Those who others see as disposable jars of clay become the “communion of saints” through which the Word of God is made known to all nations.

- “I believe that there is a holy group and a congregation made up only of saints. And you too are in this church; the Holy Spirit leads you into it through the preaching of the gospel. Formerly you knew nothing of Christ, but the Christian church proclaimed Christ to you. That is, I believe that there is a holy church which is a congregation in which there are nothing but saints. Through the Christian church, that is, through its ministry, you were sanctified; for the Holy Spirit uses its ministry in order to sanctify you. Otherwise you would never know and hear Christ.” – Martin Luther, “Sermons on the Catechism.”

While the quest for a “Holy Grail” may make for an exciting movie, those who are in Christ know that we need not undertake such a crusade because God has come to us in Jesus Christ and blesses us daily with the fullness of God’s gracious love. We need not search for God’s blessings, because these graces have been brought to us by the “earthen vessels” who have been the faithful bearers of God’s steadfast love. We are not left wondering about our place in fulfilling God’s Holy Will, for God has declared that we are *“a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people”* (1 Peter 2:9) so that we might be

the jars of clay that bear to others the good news of *“the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”*

- “Behold, Lord, an empty vessel that needs to be filled. My Lord, I am weak in the faith; strengthen me. I am cold in love; warm me and make me fervent, that my love may go out to my neighbor. I do not have a strong and firm faith; at times I doubt and am unable to trust you altogether. O Lord, help me. Strengthen my faith and trust in you. In you I have sealed the treasure of all I have. I am poor; you are rich and came to be merciful to the poor. I am a sinner; you are upright. With me, there is an abundance of sin; in you is the fullness of righteousness. Therefore I will remain with you, of whom I can receive, but to whom I may not give. Amen.” – Martin Luther.