

Proper 4 B: 1 Samuel 3, 2 Corinthians 4, Mark 3 June 3, 2018
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- 1) By and large, Episcopal preachers don't put titles on their sermons.

By and large that's probably a good thing.

My Baptist Preacher father had to come up with a sermon title by noon every Thursday

So that it could be printed in the service bulletin for the following Sunday.

He then spent from noon on Thursday until Saturday night

trying to figure out how to stuff his sermon into his previously chosen title.

Recently, however, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church DID put a simple title

on the sermon he gave at the royal wedding: THE POWER OF LOVE.

So today I'm going to put a simple title on mine:

JARS OF CLAY AND SACRED COWS:

WHY DOES GOD SO OFTEN MAKE USE OF THE FORMER;

SOMETIMES SEEM TO WORK AROUND THE LATTER—

AND WHAT DOES THE ONE HAVE TO DO WITH THE OTHER?

(Hey, that's still the limits of a sermon title tweet.

- 2) "Jars of Clay"—that's how Paul's describes human beings who seek to share God's Love.

If the phrase doesn't sound like a compliment, it isn't meant to be one.

The words Paul uses don't refer to museum piece pottery, but to disposable containers—

think plastic water bottles and aluminum soda cans.

Sounds like Paul has a self-image problem.

And, going on like he does about being 'afflicted, perplexed, persecuted and struck down;'

it also sounds like he's playing the victim.

Kinda makes me wanna mutter: *Paul! Get a life!*

More puzzling still is that he's just been talking about himself as a torch bearer of Creative Divine Light:

The God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness shines in our hearts

to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, he says.

But then he does a 180 turn—from Bright Light of Christ to Jar of Clay. How odd is that?

Mixing metaphors, especially conflicting ones, is NOT a recommended communication strategy!

- 3) But the best rhetorical strategy in any given situation depends on those you're talking to—
and in this case, Paul's hearers are the Christians in Corinth.

For many of these high intellect, high energy, high power, high competition, very DC-like folks,
the way you establish your credentials, even as a bearer of the Light of Christ,

is to be recognized as a Shining Celebrity Super Star—

I'm a great Christian, say church folks in Corinthians, see how I GLOW!

From there it is only a short step to: *MY Jesus light is brighter than YOUR Jesus light.*

So Paul suddenly, sharply changes his “LIGHT” metaphor to a “CLAY JAR” one:

Yes, indeed, we carry the light; but the light we carry is not our own.

We can bear it well or poorly, but we don't make the shine.

- 4) Paul is fortunate, because, unlike his contentious Corinthian colleagues,
He has a Hebrew history upon which to draw.

A history in which clay pot/light treasure carriers are not the exception, but the rule.

The story of Samuel and Eli we've heard today is as classic as it gets.

- *The word of the Lord was rare in those days; it begins, visions were not widespread*
- No surprise there: Eli's two sons are (quote) “scoundrel priests.”
They take advantage of their high-profile position by being ON the take.
They violate the sacred boundaries of their vocation by sexually abusing women.
They are exactly the kind of sacred role models who fuel cynical religious skepticism—
If THESE are God's representatives, who wants to see or hear from God?
- So, nobody in Israel is looking and listening for God—which creates a Catch-22:
The less folks look and listen for God, the less they see and hear of God.
No vision of God/no seeing of God; no voice of God/no hearing of God—
a vicious circle—who can help reverse it—A failed old priest and clueless little kid?
Those are the least likely of candidates—whom, God decides, will work just fine.
- The Biblical Storyteller is a better dramatist than this preacher could ever be.
No need to repeat the narrative, no reason to retrace the plot.
Just to name the obvious: It is in the mutual ineptitude of Samuel and Eli—
both of whom, bless them, still keep on listening to and speaking with each other—
it is in that conversation between Jars of Clay that the Word of God at last comes through.
And once that Word of Light and Life comes alive, it just keeps on coming.
- *As Samuel grew up, the Storyteller says, the Lord was with him,
and let none of his words fall to the ground.*
The Storyteller then concludes with a telling observation:
All Israel knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.
Trustworthy Prophet—THAT, Paul tells Christians—
both in Corinth and in our nation's Capital—
that is what is needed—that is all that matters—that is all that counts.
The point of being a Clay Jar is not to sparkle with self-attracting, self-serving spin—
but to get the sacred treasure inside from Point A to Point B intact.

- 5) From Jars of Clay to Sacred Cows—Sacred Cows is NOT the phrase Mark's Jesus uses
in his early-on head-to-head with the religious establishment over how to keep the Sabbath.

Sacred Cows is a phrase we use to depict patterns of belief and behavior that must, at all cost, be maintained by all community members—patterns that are required because they represent and embody the community's self-designated sense of identity and validity, value and viability.

(It's what the community "stands for"—Think STAND FOR the National Anthem.)

Sacred Cows are what we can't contemplate giving up without losing our grip on who we are. (The term is often, even usually invoked to describe patterns in OTHER groups, not ours.)

They keep on worshipping their sacred cows—how silly is THAT?

The Hindu tradition from which the word derives, doesn't see Sacred Cows as at ALL silly!) That point is worth noting, because most of us, on the far side of Sunday Blue Laws, may well be disposed to cheer Jesus on as he takes on the Pharisees:

Sock it to 'em, Jesus! Slay those Sacred Cows!

The Sabbath was made for US, not us for the SABBATH.

It is our inalienable right to shop till we drop on the sabbath.

WE don't have any Sabbath Sacred Cows—Not US, NO sirree!

Had Jesus only waited until after sundown on the sabbath to heal the man of his chronic condition, he would have gotten no push-back whatsoever—he's being deliberately provocative.

Provocative as Jesus' sabbath rule challenging moves are, however;

his concern is NOT to dispense with sabbath belief structures, or sabbath behavior strictures.

His concern is to recall his fellow Torah followers to a deep reconnection between the external expressions of their Covenant bond with God and the underlying meaning of that Covenant relationship.

Is there a connection between the external and the underlying? YES, very definitely.

Is there an ironclad identification between the surface and the source? NO, there is not.

In any relationship of mutual commitment, behavior patterns can shift, over time, they can devolve from mindful habit toward unconscious, mindless, even knee-jerk rote. from affirmations of deep faith, to badges of group identity, to litmus tests for legitimacy, and finally, to weapons of attack.

The Pharisees were "watching him to see whether he would cure on the sabbath"—a pretty good indication of their drift from sabbath observance as faith expression to sabbath observance as litmus test.

Immediately after the healing the Pharisees conspire the Herodians, their political enemies, to do Jesus in—a very clear indication of how desperate their grip on their group identity.

But that was them, and this is us. Indeed.

There is a well-meaning but focus-losing rule follower nestled somewhere deep in all of us. Where and how and when and why we get distracted can vary widely from person to person and from group to group.

That we can, by degrees, become so distracted is endemic to us all.

The more we lose a sense of how grounded we are in the Source of our Child of God identity,
the more we cling for dear life to fixed and frozen surface symbols OF that identity.

- 6) So—the God who often chooses to work THROUGH Clay Jars
is a God who, on occasion, chooses to work AROUND Sacred Cows.

If I start to hear myself saying something like:

I don't wanna be just an ordinary fragile, dispensable clay jar;

I just gotta be the best and the brightest—the shiniest pot on the shelf—

If I am voicing that anxiety, it may well be a symptom of Sacred Cow Syndrome—

If only I can check all the right boxes

(as long as I just know what and how and when and where)

then I'll be loved and honored and respected and safe and secure.

But the message God may be trying to send me is, at once, more humbling and more freeing:

I know you're clay, I made you clay, I like clay. I can make good use of jars of clay—

if only you don't insist on trying to be something bigger, brighter, better than you are.

Or, to mix the metaphors in the different stories we have heard today,

maybe God is trying to tell us:

I'll be much happier, and everyone will do much better

if you all just concentrate on sharing My treasure that you carry—

share THAT treasure with others who also carry My treasure.

Don't get fixated on, distracted by,

how clean scrubbed and fresh painted the credentials on the surface of your jars.

I have a hunch that what God could use in our nation right now

is Clay Jar Samuels who are known, not by how great they are;

but by how trustworthy they are as prophets of the Lord.
