

“...not ourselves...”

In all of his letters, St. Paul responds to those who challenged his authority. Many of these challenges came from so-called “teachers” and “apostles” who, after St. Paul had moved on, visited and tried to influence congregations throughout the Mediterranean area that Paul had helped to begin. This was especially true of Corinth, one of the most important cities in 1st century Greece. Paul helped to start this community and cared for them deeply. We see his affection and warmth in his two letters to the Corinthians.

Jews and Gentiles, and even other Christians, challenged Paul’s authority in three ways. First, they criticized his background, his experience, especially his conversion. He had been a Jewish extremist, persecuting Christians before his conversion on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-22). He spent time in the desert after his conversion and, after three years, he went to Jerusalem to meet with Peter and other leaders of the Christian community.

Paul was accused of preaching and teaching doctrines that were not orthodox, not true. Jewish leaders were especially critical. Romans and other Gentiles saw his belief in Jesus as Lord and Savior as a threat to their cultural assumptions.

Lastly, Paul was opposed for his concerns about money – especially his hope to raise funds for the communities in Jerusalem suffering from famine and oppression. We know Paul’s opponents arrested him several times; he was beaten; ultimately, he was arrested in Jerusalem and sent to Rome for final judgment, where he stayed under house arrest until his death.

In response to all who attacked him, Paul continually pointed to Jesus – to the power of Jesus’ love, his life, his resurrection, his teaching. We see this in today’s reading from his second letter to the Corinthians. “We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord...” Paul isn’t promoting his own life, his own authority, his own power, his own wisdom. Everything he has been through – his experiences and conversion; everything he teaches and preaches; everything he has done to raise money has been to make ‘clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us...”

When the New Revised Standard Version translation of the Bible was introduced some 30 years ago, and then later became the official translation for use in the Episcopal Church, one of the changes I was extremely unhappy about is in today’s reading. Since 1611 with the first translation of St. Paul’s words into English, the King James Version, the 7th verse of chapter 4 of 2nd Corinthians read, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels...” Now it’s “clay jars!”

But I’m coming around. Paul wants us to see the great paradox – the difference between human reality and God’s power. Clay jars are easily broken; they are of little value; they possess no true, lasting beauty. Yet in each one of us – you and me and all God’s “clay jars” – we can find the treasure of God: God’s love, God’s life, God’s power. Earthen vessels sound pretty special. Maybe we do need to remember we are clay jars! We know we are dust, but Paul reminds us that we are dust bound for glory.

So there will be afflictions, persecutions, conflicts, suffering. As many Christians in the past have taught us, “We’ll be knocked down, but never knocked out.” We might be at our wit’s end, but not at our hope’s end. This is both the tribulation and the triumph of life with Christ.

I’m currently reading a book entitled Forged in Crisis: The Power of Courageous Leadership in Turbulent Times. The author is Nancy Koehn, a professor at Harvard Business School. She cites several people from history who were not born leaders but became leaders because of the choices they made in times of crisis. Two that she includes are Abraham Lincoln and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. They, like Paul, remind us that it’s not about ourselves – we have this treasure in clay jars. Let God’s love be our strength.

And so we begin this long Pentecost season with St. Paul’s teaching and Jesus’ example. People are more important than rules and rituals. God’s love is more powerful than the Pharisees and the Romans. It is God’s love we celebrate every Sunday, not the obligations of the Church. The Sabbath was made for us, we are not made for the Sabbath. That doesn’t mean that you don’t need to come to church. We come to church to celebrate God’s love with each other. We need the Sabbath. Our faith, our religion is not about rules or rituals – it’s about God’s love – a love we celebrate every Sunday, every Sabbath.