

Pecans, Pianos & Old Clay Pots

2 Corinthians 4:1, 5-12

September 6, 2009

(Ordinary Time)

**Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;
 where there is hatred, let me sow love;
 where there is injury, pardon;
 where there is doubt, faith;
 where there is despair, hope;
 where there is darkness, light;
 and where there is sadness, joy.**

**O Divine Master,
 grant that I may not so much seek
 to be consoled as to console;
 to be understood as to understand;
 to be loved as to love:
 for it is in giving that we receive,
 it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
 and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life
 in Christ our Lord.**

My grandmother prayed that prayer. It was one of her favorites, she said. And she prayed it often... She *prayed* it. And she *lived* it. It was *her* prayer, I think. Even though somebody else prayed it more than seven hundred years before her. It was her prayer ... that God would make her an instrument of his peace. And that he would use her somehow to bring a just a little more of his healing grace into the world. And he did. He answered her prayer. Because my grandmother was someone who sowed the seeds of love and hope and joy in others. And she loved and she gave and she did all the wonderful things that grandmothers do.

But there was something about her that was different, I think. Because she was born in another time, really. In 1895, mind you. And to me she was ancient. Grandmas today aren't like that, you know. They're just regular people who happen to have grandchildren. And if you ask them, they'll tell you... they're middle-aged. Which means, of course, that some of them are going to live to be a hundred and thirty or so. But it's true. They're just middle-aged people. Not all that different from anyone else.

But my grandma was ancient. She came from a different time and a different world, I think. She wore long cotton dresses and dark stockings on her feet. And her hair was snow white and braided and twisted into a tight little bun at the back of her head. And she wore wire-rimmed glasses that made her look even older, I think, and knowing and wise. And over her dress she wore a long, white apron that looked like something an Amish person might wear.

And sometimes, when I was a boy, she would take down her hair. And she'd let me comb it with a little comb. And she'd tell little stories or sing some old hymn like, "Whiter than Snow," or "A Child of the King," or "His Eye Is on the Sparrow." And every time she did, she was sowing seeds. And I hope some of them fell on good soil and will continue to blossom and grow and bring forth good fruit.

But ... what I really want to tell you this morning is that my grandma Jones knew about fruit. She knew what was good and what wasn't. And when I was just a wee little boy, she tried to teach me the difference. And it happened like this: We were out gathering apples one

morning, because she had a hankering, she said, for some fried apples and cream. So we took a bucket and we went to the orchard. And we picked up the apples that had fallen from the trees. And I started to put one in the bucket. But she stopped me and said, "Oh, that one's no good. See? It's all wrinkled up on the outside. That means it's rotten on the inside."

And I looked at the apple and I looked at my grandma, who was ancient, remember, with snow white hair, and wire-rimmed glasses, and a face that was deep-scored with ... well, with "character lines." Isn't that what people call them? And I said, "Grandma, are you rotten on the inside, too." And she said, "No, But I'm beginning to wonder about you!"

Maybe that's why Paul said, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels -- in old clay pots." Maybe ... just maybe, he was trying to make it up to his grandma. "Gee, Grams, did I say rotten? I meant to say *precious*. There's something *precious* inside you!"

It kind of reminds me of something my great Uncle Otto said once. Uncle Otto lived in the Cumberland

mountains of southeastern Kentucky. He had a little store in Harlan, mind you. And he sold ice cream and peach soda at the soda fountain there in his store. And he would sit and spin yarns and tell tales to his customers as long as they would listen. And he would swear “with my hand held up,” he would say, that every story he told was true. “Nothing *but* the truth,” he claimed. But he was also known to have said that “Truth is like salt. A little of it sprinkled here and there adds seasoning to a good story. Makes it more appetizing. But too much of it all at once just isn’t good for you!”

Anyway ... Uncle Otto used to talk about a fellow named Muley who lived up on Pine Mountain. His real name was Wilson, I think. Wilson J. Boggs. But they called him Muley, he said, because he was big. Big as a mule! And, according to Uncle Otto, he was not the sharpest knife in the drawer. Couldn’t read or write, he said. And he was a *heathen* to boot (says Otto). Somebody who didn’t have any *use* for the church. In fact, one Sunday, he said, Muley went fishing. And on the way home he ran into the preacher. And he was caught. On Sunday. With a fishing rod in his hand. But it might as well have been a smoking

gun as far as the preacher was concerned. “Muley,” he said. “You’ve been fishing!” And Muley looked down at the ground and said, “Yes sir, I have.” And the preacher said, “Muley, it’s Sunday. You should have been in church.” And Muley looked up and said, “Oh, preacher ... I couldn’t have come to church anyway ... even if I hadn’t gone fishing.”

“Why’s that?” said the preacher.

“Well, because,” said Muley, “my wife’s home in bed with the flu.” ✕

But Muley *did* go to church. And he was converted. And one Sunday morning he announced that he’d been called to preach. And he did. He did. He didn’t have a church of his own, mind you. But he’d fill in for the pastor every now and then. And he led the Sunday night service about once a month. And he did okay, said Uncle Otto. “He’s no Billy Graham. But he does okay. Speaks from the heart ... and that goes a long way. After all,” he said, “the race is not always to the swift, but to those who keep running.” And poor old Muley was none too swift. But he kept preaching. He’d preach there at Pine Mountain on

Sunday evenings. And fill in here and there when he was needed, And every once-in-a-while, someone would ask him to conduct a funeral service, or a wedding, or a baptism.

In fact, Uncle Otto told his customers that he was there when Muley conducted his first funeral. “I’ll never forget it,” he said. “Because a quartet sang that sweet old song that says, *‘I am going to a city where the streets with gold are laid, where the tree of life is blooming and the roses never fade...’* And Brother Muley stepped up to the pulpit,” he said. “And he looked out over the congregation. And he reached into his pocket and took out a pecan or a walnut, some kind of nut. And he took the two halves of the shell and without a word he held them up. And then he pointed to the casket, which was open -- he pointed to the ‘dearly departed’ and said, *‘Friends, what we have here today is only the shell ... the nut is already gone.’*”

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace ... me, Lord, me. Where there’s hatred, Lord, let me sow love; where there’s injury, pardon; where there’s doubt, faith; and despair, hope; and darkness, light. And where there

is sadness, Lord ... take me and use me and let me sow joy ...

Isn’t that what we want? We’re a little like Muley, I think. We want to do well. We want to do some good. We want to live the kind of lives that make a difference, somehow. But just look at us. *Look at us!* We’re like Muley. I mean, really. We are. Because we’re not perfect either. And there are times, I think, when we look in the mirror and see faces (and hearts) that are deep-scored and scarred by so many things ... By the past. And the present. And the things we have done and left undone. We want to do well. We want to do good. We want to be instruments of God’s peace in the world. But how can we? We’re flawed. And we’ve failed. And we’re so far from perfect. God *knows* we are. So how could he ever use people like us?

It makes you feel kind of rotten inside, like a wrinkly old apple, or empty inside like Muley’s pecan. And that’s not a good feeling. ✠

Ah, but *remember*, says Paul, *we have this treasure in earthen vessels -- in old clay pots (like us) for a reason...*

that it might be clear that this wonderful power, this amazing thing called grace, comes from God and not from us. ✠

Uncle Otto said, when Muley started preaching there were people there who thought that he shouldn't. He can't read and write, they said. And he isn't too bright. So what right does he have to tell us how to live? ✠ It's a good question, I think. And people ask it sometimes. They asked in Corinth about Paul the Apostle. "Who does he think he is?" they said. "What gives him the right to preach to us?" And they meant it. They tried their best to turn people against him. Because he just wasn't what they thought he should be.

And all of this happened behind his back, mind you, when Paul wasn't there. But even in a place and time where there was no internet, no text-messaging, or cell phones, or emails or even snail mail, we call it, Paul caught wind of it. Heard it through the *grapevine*, I guess. So he wrote them a letter, a really *long* letter, ***to be read in the church.***

And in the letter he said, "I have to agree. You're right. I'm not perfect. I'm not. There's no doubt about *that*. But that's not what I preach. I preach the Lord," he said. "And his name isn't Paul. His name is Jesus. I'm just a servant who has come here to serve him."

And just like Muley the preacher, Paul knew in his heart that God had called him -- even with all of his faults and all of his failures -- to be an instrument of God's peace and to sow the seeds of faith and hope and love in the world. For the very same God who brought light out of darkness on the first day of creation had opened Paul's eyes and let him see the Light. And now that Light was shining in him. And, mind you, Paul could read and write better than most. (We *know* that. He *could*.) But he had some rough edges, too -- like an old clay pot. But when God looked at Paul he didn't see someone who was worthless and rotten and empty. ***He saw a vessel in which he could carry the treasure of his love and his presence to others.*** And so God chose this man, this ordinary man, to be an apostle, an instrument of his peace.

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That's what we want. We want to do well. We want to do some good. We want to make a difference, somehow. We do. We do ... But when we look in the mirror we see wrinkly old apples, and empty shells, and old clay jars that are flawed and fragile and not fit to be used. And the thing that gets me is that God sees it, too! God sees the faults. God sees the flaws. And God knows -- God knows we "miss the mark" in so many ways.

But in case you've forgotten, let me remind you (again) that isn't all God sees when he looks at you. For when God looks at you he sees someone he cares for, someone he loves. A man, a woman, a child created in his very own image -- the apple of his eye and the joy of his heart. Someone for whom he would rather die than live without... And in his hands, you are an instrument -- a vessel in which he can carry the wonderful treasure of his love (and joy and forgiveness) to others.

Let me say it like this ... God loves you. Really. He does. Whoever you are. Whatever you've done (or not done) in your life. And whoever you are -- no matter how rotten or empty or useless you may feel (at times) -- God can use you. In fact, God chooses you to be an instrument of his peace, a blessing to others. ✕

When I was a kid, a giant picture hung on the wall in my room. It was a poster my dad had framed for me, when I was about ten years old. And it was a picture of one of my heroes ... I know what you're thinking. but it wasn't Billy Graham. And it wasn't James Bond or Superman or even the Lone Ranger. It was Beethoven -- the composer -- the one who wrote the Moonlight Sonata. He was my hero. And I had his picture there on my wall. It was the first thing I saw every morning for the next ten years.

And my parents didn't care for him, so much. They were more interested in Floyd (Van) Cramer, I think. And Loretta Lynn and Bing Crosby. But my grandma Jones loved him. And so did her friend, Mrs. Fleshman, who went to our church. And she was a treasure. Just a delight she was. One of the kindest and happiest people I've ever

known. And when I was in high school, Mrs. Fleshman started losing her eyesight. So the kids in our youth group would take turns reading to her after school every day. And it was wonderful. Because Mrs. Fleshman was such a kind and warm-hearted person. And she had a way of making you feel like *somebody*, whoever you were.

And one day after school I went to her house. And she handed me a book and she told me to turn to page 189 and read her the story. And it was a story about Beethoven. And it said that in his later years, he would spend hours every day at an old, broken down piano. And the funny thing is ... it was worthless. The strings were out of tune. And the soundboard was cracked. And it was just worthless -- or, at least, it would have been to anyone else. But by that time in his life, Beethoven was deaf. And playing that old broken down piano brought him great joy. In his hands it was an instrument of peace.

I read that story and I couldn't believe it. There was something about it that hit home. Because goodness knows there are times when we all feel a little like Beethoven's old piano. I mean, sometimes we all feel a bit

worthless and broken and not "up to snuff." But Mrs. Fleshman said, "Keep reading, there's more."

So I turned the page. And it said that Beethoven couldn't carry on a conversation anymore. People would try to communicate with him. But it was embarrassing for him, and usually made him feel even worse than he did. And at that time in his life, Beethoven felt useless -- like an empty shell, I think.

But one day he learned that his neighbor's son had been killed in a terrible accident. And he wanted to do something for him. He wanted to help his poor neighbor, but he didn't know how. So he prayed for the man. And then he went to his house. And without saying a word he walked in, sat down at the piano, and played for nearly an hour. And when he finished playing he left. He didn't know what else to do.... He felt so helpless, so useless because he couldn't hear. And yet, the man said later that it was Beethoven's visit that helped him through that terrible day. It was, he said, as if he was a vessel through which God poured out his love and care.

And so was Paul, and Miss Fleshman, and Muley and grandma. They were earthen vessels every one. And yet, they carried a wonderful treasure. And so do you. For God has chosen *you* to be a channel of blessing, a vessel of love, an instrument of his peace.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace ... Will you pray it with me? It's number 481 in your hymnal.

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 where there is hatred, let me sow love;
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 to be consoled as to console;
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 for it is in giving that we receive,
 it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
 and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life**

in Christ our Lord. Amen.

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

Benen, ObLSB

