

Crackpots
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
Communion Meditation for June 5, 2016

2nd Corinthians 4:1-12

On most weeks, my sermon prep can be a little like herding cats. I read, and study, and reflect through many interruptions. I'm not the only one; surely you've got times like that too. This week it seems as if my cat herd is consistently distracted by flying squirrels.

When I think of clay jars, I remember those earthenware containers that held the Dead Sea scrolls, buried for hundreds of years in the dust of the desert. When I saw them on display at a museum, I recall how common they looked. As you might expect, some were found in a dismal state, either cracked or smashed all together.

That got me to remembering one very special moment on retreat 5 years ago when a few of us took a broken gardening pot and smashed it into shards so that we could incorporate the pieces into a worship display which focused on human brokenness.

And that memory caused me to ponder human brokenness. Where to start with that? 880 displaced people have died crossing the Mediterranean just this week in search of a peaceful life. Responses to this ongoing human tragedy have been weak and ineffective. Where's the compassion? Have we lost our empathy?

That thought led me immediately to ponder the fractured state of our nation's politics this election year, which got me thinking about how easy it is for me to label someone I don't agree with as a "crackpot" ... especially when I let my righteous indignation bubble and boil.

See what I mean? Squirrels.

I may have taken you down an overlong journey on sermon prep road... but now I'd like to focus on "crackpots". A simple definition of the term is "a person given to eccentric, foolish or impractical notions."

Whatever the definition, some say churches attract their share of them. Maybe it's because our ideas and commitments seem strange and foolish to outsiders. Or it's because we can get a little fanatical on both the right and the left and that's how the media portrays us.

Heaven knows that anyone who really tries to follow the teachings of Jesus opens himself or herself to being labeled idealistic and impractical. And maybe we are, some days. But I'd still rather be known as a crackpot for Christ... even on the days when it's hard to turn the other cheek or to love my neighbor, than anything else.

There's an old story about a water bearer that some believe comes from China, others from India. Long ago, before modern conveniences like indoor plumbing, there was a woman hired to carry water twice a day to a wealthy family's home. The woman had two large earthen pots, each hung on the end of a pole which she carried across her neck.

One of the pots was perfect, no flaws. The other pot had a small hairline crack in it about halfway down the side but it was barely noticeable. Every day, twice a day, the perfect pot contained a full measure of water at the end of the journey while the cracked pot arrived only about half full.

For a full two years the water bearer delivered only one and a half pots full of water to her employer's home. The perfect pot did its job well, but it seems the cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do.

So one day down by the stream the cracked pot spoke to the water bearer, saying "I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you. "Why?" asked the bearer. "What are you ashamed of?" "For the past two years I have been able to deliver only half my load because this crack in my side causes water to drip all the way back to your employer's home. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work, but you don't get full value from your efforts."

The water bearer felt sorry for the old cracked pot, and in her compassion she said, "As we return, I want you to notice the flowers along the path." And as they slowly made their way back up the hill, the old cracked pot saw the sun warming the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path, which cheered it somewhat.

But at the end of the journey, it still felt bad because it had dripped away half its load, and so again it apologized to the bearer for its failure.

The woman said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of your path, but not on the other pot's side? That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you've watered them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate my employer's table. Without you being just the way you are, he would not have this beauty to grace his house."

In our denomination, the United Church of Christ, we like to say: "Whoever you are, wherever you are in life's journey, you are welcome here"--- with those words, we remember that crackpots, wounded souls, those who are vulnerable, those who need healing... all belong to God.

And the church as gathered community, and as institution (with a very small "i") does not belong to the people, it belongs to God. God called the church into being and continues to form it. Shape it. Support it. Cherish it. Forgives it. Puts up with it (!)... and sends it on a mission to be a vessel of grace and healing poured out upon the world.

Ministry, the work of the church, is about service. We are called to embody God's mercy and grace in a world that's desperate to hear good news. We are called, as Paul put it so beautifully, "so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God" (2 Cor. 4:15).

That's the goal, people. That's why we do what we do... extending grace to more and more people is more than a calling... it's in our DNA. Maybe that is apparent a little more in June because we have this annual event that brings us together and makes us go outside our doors together.

On this "Biscuit Communion Sunday", in the holy season of Strawberries, we give thanks for the opportunity to lavish such extravagant grace on our visitors (and hopefully each other).

I wish I could tell you that our work together as church (in June or at any other time of the year) will be easy. It's not. It's difficult, and it's not always going to feel as good as we hope because sometimes it feels like grace is a tight commodity. We might feel drained at the end of the day just like that poor water vessel. Don't give up.

Because what we're up against "out there" in the world is formidable.

And what we're up against "in here" within ourselves is also formidable.

We are disciples, and so we must not lose heart or become discouraged or fall into despair...

You and I exist to fulfill the ever-unfolding drama of God's grace.

You and I exist—right now—so that the light of the gospel shines more brightly.

The beauty of your soul graces the table of this house because you carry the light of hope to all the dark places.

As fragile as we think we may be, God's love is the extraordinary, priceless treasure that dwells within our hearts, even though we know we are all just common vessels made of clay... so prone to being cracked.

God still takes the risk with us. What is placed within us, this treasure of love, has extraordinary power. When we let that love flow through us we discover what grace, mercy and hope can really do in the lives of people.

And so, as we sip the cup and eat the bread today, we celebrate a blessed community of crackpots, where the vulnerable and the wounded are always included as we live together in unity. Thanks be to God! Amen.