

“Jekyll and Hyde” **II Corinthians 4:5-12; Psalm 16:5-11**

A few weeks ago I saw an advertisement on television for an Oprah Winfrey show that featured an interview with Rielle Hunter. Rielle Hunter was the mistress of one time presidential candidate, John Edwards. Their relationship took place while his wife was battling breast cancer. Of course, when these facts were revealed, John Edwards was roundly reviled. Numerous negative adjectives were used to describe him, most of them somehow incorporating the word “slimy.” He remains a favorite target of comedians like Jay Leno, as well as anyone gathered around the office copy machine.

And yet, though one would certainly not want to condone his actions, his poor choice in this instance can blind us to other positive elements of his life. The son of a mill worker, he was the first of his family to attend college. He then graduated with honors from the University of North Carolina School of Law. He was the former Director of the Center on Poverty, Work, and Opportunity at the University of North Carolina.

He experienced the pain of losing a teenage son and in his honor he, and his wife, began the Wade Edwards Foundation “to reward, encourage, and inspire young people in the pursuit of excellence.” And as both a vice-presidential and presidential candidate he spoke vigorously for the needs and hopes of average, working Americans. Noting the unhealthy economic and social disparities developing in this country, he took up the cause of Americans struggling to discover the opportunities of education, employment and health care.

In 2007, upon learning that the investment company where much of his family money resided had a portion of its assets in subprime mortgage lenders, some of which had foreclosed on the homes of Hurricane Katrina victims, Edwards divested his resources and with \$100,000 set up the Louisiana Home Rescue Funds to provide loans and grants to families who were foreclosed on by the investment firm leaders.

One can, of course, argue about John Edwards’s motives or political positions, but his past clearly shows a man who has worked to better the lives of those at the lower end of America’s socio-economic scale. Otherwise, John Edwards reminds us that the glory of God and the sinfulness of humanity always reside side by side.

Within each of us, there is the magnificence of the image of God, and the frailty of humanity. The Apostle Paul perfectly describes us when he says we are clay jars, rough, cheap, and easily broken. Paul’s analogy comes from the Greco-Roman culture in which he lived. Pottery vessels, clay jars, were numerous, inexpensive, and fragile. They were easily broken, quickly losing the precious commodity they held.

Now, whether viewing our own lives, or the existences of others, this fact is not revelatory. Someone once said that the doctrine of original sin is the only

theological concept for which there is daily empirical evidence. For instance, in 2001, the payroll company, Advanced Data Processing, screened 2.6 million prospective employees for its clients. They found that forty-four percent made false statements about their employment achievements, forty-one percent misrepresented their educational achievements, and twenty-three percent lied about having a professional license or credential.

I still recall a few years ago when Jean and I and a group from the church visited Italy where it is estimated that one half of the artistic treasures of the western world reside. We were awed by the spiritual power and artistry of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling, the grandeur of the Roman forum, the still unknown architectural genius of the Pantheon, the serenity of St. Peter's Church, the decaying beauty of Venice, the miraculous saving of the leaning tower of Pisa. All of these are feats of art, architecture, and spiritual expression that lift the mind and heart to see the pinnacle of human achievement. But while our days were filled with these lofty monuments to humanity's best, the nightly CNN broadcasts displayed the work of suicide bombers in Israel, India and Pakistan squaring off, starvation in Africa, CEO's of American corporations lying and cheating to line their pockets.

So vividly does each of us display both the treasure and destruction of human existence.

Once upon a time a woman died and went to heaven. When she reached the Pearly Gates she was met by St. Peter. She said, "Am I in heaven?"

He said, "Yes, you are at the Pearly Gates."

"Do I get to come in?" asked the woman.

St. Peter said, "Yes, if you can spell a word."

"What word?"

"Any word."

She said, "Ok, I'll spell love."

She did and she was allowed to enter.

A few minutes later, St. Peter approached her and said, "I have to leave for a minute. Would you watch the gate?"

She looked astonished and said, "You want me to watch the gate?"

St. Peter said, "Yes."

She asked, "What do I do if someone comes up?"

He replied, "Just what I did. Ask them to spell a word."

As she stood looking around at all the beautiful sights in heaven, she saw a man walking toward the gates. As he drew closer, the woman recognized him. It was her husband. She was shocked!

He walked up to the gates. "What happened?" the wife asked.

"Well," the husband replied, "I was so upset after your funeral that on the way home I had an accident and died. Am I in heaven?"

"You are at the Pearly Gates," she said.

"Do I get to come in?" he asked.

“Yes, but you have a spell a word,” she said.

“What word?” he asked.

“Czechoslovakia,” she replied.

Neither the treasure of God’s glory or the sinfulness of our nature are ever very far away from us.

So, what do these dual inclinations say to us? How do we find meaning and purpose in a life torn between the glory of creation and the destructiveness of human nature?

We begin by acknowledging our own sinfulness. Yes, we are clay jars. This topic arose in this letter because some in the Corinthian Church wished to accentuate the faults of the Apostle Paul. They accused him of arrogance, overstating his importance, acting like he was in charge.

Paul defends himself. But he also notes that yes, he is guilty of human imperfections. But, he argues, if you think about it, my imperfections, your imperfections, more clearly allow us to see the glory of God working through us in Jesus Christ. Our sinfulness gives direct contrast to the wonder of God’s love and forgiveness found in Jesus. Noting the imperfections within, our tendency to be sinful, we understand how goodness and righteousness cannot be found in our human natures, but only in Jesus. Only by allowing God to work within and through us can we overcome the evil seeking to destroy us.

And that is why the Christian lives in hope. Seeking hope within the context of human nature will only depress us. Just look around you at the destruction wrought by family and friends, by each one of us. Left to our own devices, without God, we quickly make a mess of our lives. And yet, we also possess the opportunity, the power to invite Christ into our lives, seeking to direct our thoughts and actions into avenues of peace, joy, and happiness. Christ provides us the power to live and think differently. But we only do this when we grasp the mess we are in, that we are clay jars. And the knowledge of our inadequacy in the face of evil leads us to seek the solution to the sin that clings so closely — and that solution is Jesus the Christ.

Earl S. Johnson, Jr. is pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Johnstown, NY. A frequent contributor to a national magazine entitled, The Presbyterian Outlook, he told this story in one edition. He said one incident in his ministry stands out. He was the pastor of a large church, which was experiencing personnel difficulties, financial concerns, and conflict. One morning, confronted by these numerous issues, he was preparing his sermon by spending some time in Bible study, meditation, and prayer. “Suddenly,” he writes, “I felt as if strength and courage had been pumped into my whole being with some kind of spiritual air hose. I sat up straighter; I was encouraged; it was like having a steel brace inserted into a sagging spirit.” Somehow he knew that a

member of his church had been praying for him. Glancing at his watch, he noted it was exactly 10 a.m.

The next Sunday he mentioned this incident in his sermon. He didn't want his members to think he had lost his mind, or as he said, "gone Pentecostal on them," but he was certain prayer had been directed toward him and he wanted to know who had done it. Later that week, one of his trustees came to his study. "I was the one praying for you at 10 a.m. on Wednesday," she said. "I know because the clock struck 10." A few days later another member called him on the phone. "I was praying for you at 10 last Wednesday. I was in my car and thinking about you and the concerns of the church when the 10 a.m. news came on the radio."

We may not understand exactly how it works. But when God's fragile, clay jar people turn to God for help, the Spirit of Christ will seek to heal our hearts and minds.

"Jekyll and Hyde"

When we look at our lives, we quickly see their Jekyll and Hyde qualities, much like the man who reverts back and forth between his good Dr. Jekyll and evil Mr. Hyde in Robert Louis Stevenson's novel.

Yet, the summer months possess a rhythm that can cause us to question our need for God. Lying on the beach, the summer sun bronzing our bodies, the searing heat burning out the problems that clung so closely back at home, we can begin to question how necessary God is to our physical, mental, and spiritual well being. Just how important is all this religion stuff we wonder to ourselves, careful not to divulge this heretical talk to others. We think, I seem to get along pretty well without too close an alliance with the Almighty. I believe, I just don't let it get out of control.

It is a legitimate question. But this week, I ask you to ponder this:

Besides your faith in Jesus Christ, does anything else in your life make you a better person?

Does any other philosophy or person or job make you want to be the human being you should be?

When you look at what really counts in your life does anything other than the Spirit of God make you and me more loving, honest, caring, kind, generous?

Without the example of Jesus, and the power He gives us to change our lives, who would you be?

This morning, besides Jesus, does anything stand between your personal Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde?

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