We probably all have seen or at least imagined--the box we carefully wrapped and labeled, “Handle With Care” being tossed from the clerk into a bin full of other like boxes. We had expected the person at least to carefully walk the box over to the bin and place it gently in the container -- or maybe even give it a special place, a safe place. It is fragile and we wanted it handled gently and with care.

Perhaps all children should come with a tag that says, “Handle With Care”. Although I am constantly amazed at how strong we are or how strong we can be. Our world is filled with people who accomplish great things despite many odds and obstacles. I watched a little of the Women’s Softball College World Series yesterday and they were commenting on one player who has a debilitating disease; the doctors said she would never play softball and there she was on the field and at bat representing her school in a college world series game! The world abounds with stories of those who have overcome--many even in our congregation. And, in many ways that can be said, at times, of all of us. We found strength for situations that we never thought we would have strength for. We have refused to give up, admit failure or defeat. We are doing impossible things. We are stronger than we ever imagined - and yet, Paul says, we have this strength, this treasure in “jars of clay”.

We all need “special” handling from time to time. Matthew reports about Jesus, after his temptation in the wilderness, “The devil left him and suddenly angels came and waited on him” (Matthew 4:11). Or, as we move to the end of his ministry, Jesus asks the disciples in the Garden, “Could you not keep awake one hour” (Mark. 14:37b). We live in these “jars of clay”, fragile and yet often stronger than we or the world could imagine.

Paul says, “We have this treasure…” Now, when I think of treasure my mind immediately goes to pirates, pirate maps and hidden stores of gold, etc. Now, this could be influenced somewhat because I watched one of the Pirates of the Carribean movies this past week! But, then I thought of another movie - Richie Rich - I think. He is a cartoon character - a rich kid. The movie was about thieves wanting to get into the family vault. Not sure how the story line developed but they did get into the famiy vault and found the treasures: Richie’s first baseball glove, some of his first toys, family pictures, etc. Nothing that was going to make them rich but treasures to the family.

This leads to the question: What are the treasures Paul is talking about? They have to be what we have experienced from God: God’s forgiveness, God’s grace and God’s love. Paul refers to these as our “extraordinary powers”. It is not the ability to leap buildings in a single bound, but to love as God has loved. It is the strength to forgive and move on. The strength to forge new relationships with new people. The strength to see beyond what is to what can be. The strength to change the world.

This strength comes in fragile vessels, “jars of clay”. But these vessels are strong. Paul says we are: afflicted, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. We are stronger than expected.

However, we still underestimate the power/strength that we have, the power of love and forgiveness. We can change the world but not in the way the world expects change.

Why does the world underestimate us? It is because we have adopted the world’s standards. We have sought power in the way the world seeks power. We have adopted the world’s understanding of power over the history of the church. We have tried to force people into the faith -- believe or die. We have used violence against those who are not like us. We have not learned to use
the power of love and forgiveness. We have not used the treasure that we have in these “jars of clay”.

There is a story from Eastern Europe in the days of the Iron Curtain – before the fall of the Berlin Wall. The story of the Word going forth, one page at a time. Bibles were banned and yet portions of Scripture were showing up all over the place. The culprit was an old woman, crippled with arthritis. Her only tools were an old typewriter, paper and one, useable finger. She would spend her days copying Scripture. When asked how she dared, she replied “The government does not expect or search for a crippled, old lady. They leave me alone!” She, a jar of clay, was keeping the story alive.

Paul says that we have this treasure--and when we do unite in love and forgiveness - what power we do have.

This Table is a table of love and forgiveness. We are not here because we are worthy to be here. We are here because we have been made worthy by the love of Christ - a love we must never forget. All those who were gathered in that upper room will fall away in the coming hours. Have you ever wondered why Judas was there at all? He has already made arrangements for the betrayal. Was Jesus hoping that in the final hour love might win in his heart also? But, Peter will openly deny him in the coming hours. The rest will run and hide. They are temporarily defeated.

In a few short weeks though, they will begin to transform the world. They will begin to understand the power they have in these “jars of clay”. They will love as Christ loved, forgive as Christ forgave and begin to bring this message to the whole world. The church began not with an army filled with swords and spears but with one filled with love and forgiveness.

Paul says we have this “extraordinary power” in “jars of clay”. Power in vessels that need to be “handled with care” but, vessels that are stronger than we can possibly imagine. A treasure that can change the world - a treasure that means we have the strength to love.

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