

Holy Ground
2 Corinthians 4:7-12
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Paul is defending himself. Defending himself from the accusation that he is not truly the apostle of God. The reason that others might conclude that he is not an apostle is simply by looking at him. As Eugene Best writes, "To all appearances he was no more than an earthenware vessel, a cheap clay pot." Paul bore the marks of his trials and sufferings. His physical body was scarred and damaged.

I've never had quite the same experience as Paul. The only thing similar was how often I heard, especially when I was younger, that I didn't look like a minister. This was particularly acute when I had shoulder length curly hair and a goatee. Fortunately you all have been spared that look.

You can imagine why some people, when seeing Paul, would ponder "Surely this broken-down man cannot be the apostle of God. Surely God would work through someone noble, beautiful, or strong." In our own day there is a strain of American Christianity which believes that we can see the blessings of God in people of good health and financial prosperity.

Contrary to these notions, Paul writes "we have this treasure, the glory of God, in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us."

Paul turns the normal understanding on its head. His very weakness is a sign of the power of God. Or, as theologian Stanley Hauerwas might put it, holiness is located not in our separation from the difficulties of reality, but precisely in our bearing reality, even when it is difficult.

We so often think of Holy Ground as some unique, special, beautiful place. In my own life I can think of those places that particularly moved me. They usually included a tree.

Growing up in northeast Oklahoma, every summer I attended the Grand Lake Baptist Association campground. Overlooking the lake near the Miami, First Baptist cabin there were located four trees that my imagination saw in the form of a cross. I would sit at the base of the tree that composed the foot of the cross in order to pray and read the Bible, while gazing over the water.

There are more places like this, holy grounds in my life story. How about you?

But we make a mistake when we isolate the holy in special and unique places and in certain types of people. That's one thing Paul is pushing against here in this letter to the Corinthians. Every kind of person can be a vessel of God's glory. Any kind of ground, we might conclude, can be holy ground.

Quaker pastor Richard Foster proclaims,

Through time and experience we discover that everywhere we go is 'holy ground' and everything we do is 'sanctified action.' The jagged line dividing the sacred and the secular becomes very dim indeed, for we know that nothing is outside the realm of God's purview and loving care.

I have found Foster's writing on holiness to be quite helpful in preparing this Lenten season. In his book *Streams of Living Water* he has a list of six things that holiness is not and six things it is. Since there are six weeks in the season of Lent, each of these Sundays we will, in some way, explore something from Foster's list. Here is this week's description of what holiness is not:

Holiness *is not* otherworldliness. Its life is not found by developing logic-tight compartments of things sacred and things secular. We do not come into it by studiously avoiding contact with our manifestly evil and broken world.

Instead, Foster describes what Christian holiness is:

Holiness *is* world-affirming. The holy life is found smack in the middle of everyday life. We discover it while being freely and joyfully *in* the world . . . Holiness sees the sacred in all things.

While preparing this sermon series I googled the phrase "everything is sacred" and the search turned up a song lyric from a band I'm unfamiliar with. The band is Cherri Bomb and the song is "Better this way." I didn't care much for the song, but I did really like this phrase, "Everything's sacred, nothing's wasted."

It speaks to Paul's theme here in 2 Corinthians. God can work through anyone and anything. The scarred and broken person is not wasted; even he is sacred, a vessel for the glory of God.

Then, reading for this week's Theology Reading Group, I encountered a sentence in the book *On the Mystery* by Catherine Keller which resonated with this song lyric. She wrote, "Saving is the opposite not of *damning* but of *wasting*." This sentence appeared in her discussion of the incarnation of which she writes, "The incarnation saves us precisely through our carnality, through the materiality that we share with all creatures."

Our bodies are saved when they are not wasted. They are made holy as they become vessels for God's glory. But this does not mean that our bodies are spared the difficulties of bearing reality. Quite the opposite. The Christian body still experiences pain and suffering. But, as I've said already, "Holiness is located not in our separation from the difficulties of reality, but precisely in our bearing reality, even when it is difficult."

I've been reading Nancy Eiesland's book *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. Last year our church committed to becoming officially designated an "Accessible to All" church. Reading this book is part of my own commitment to develop a better theology of disability so that my preaching and teaching and pastoral care might be more

inclusive and accessible to all.

In this book, Eiesland shares the story of Nancy Mairs, a poet who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis at age twenty-nine. She recounts how Mairs' began to become more aware of her body through the pain and difficulty of the disease. Mairs had to learn how to live with her body as it changed. She uses the image of birth, saying that Mairs had to "conceive a body." Eiesland writes:

Slowly Mairs discovered that her body was not going away at all; rather it was being incorporated (becoming a body) for the first time. She gained awareness of her body that she had never had before. She could no longer take her physical existence for granted; by necessity, she had to pay attention to the placement of her feet, to raising herself from the toilet seat, to lifting her coffee cup. The concentration on these ordinary tasks previously performed unselfconsciously opened a world of space to her. She began to realize the ways in which she was formed by the place her body takes in the world.

In her poetry Mairs expressed what it meant to be a body, something which able-bodied people do often take for granted. Coping with her disease did not make her a saint or a hero. She resisted such labels saying "I am only doing what I have to do. It's enough."

Eiesland concludes, "Recognizing and coming to terms with the difficulty that comes with disability, Mairs lives not with the grace of a martyr but with the resolve of someone who realizes that an ordinary life is filled with blessings and curses and that it is sometimes hard to differentiate between the two."

As I said earlier to the children, Christianity is an incarnational and a sacramental faith, which means that we believe God's grace and God's presence are encountered in the ordinary things of physical reality. In things like bread and grape juice. Or the box of macaroni and cheese that Grant Switzer might bring forward today as a reminder that communion Sunday is also food pantry Sunday. Our observance of the sacrament of communion helps to remind us that anything and anyone can be holy ground.

"Everything's sacred, nothing's wasted." No person, no place, no moment is excluded from the holiness of God. As Richard Foster wrote, "Through time and experience we discover that everywhere we go is 'holy ground' and everything we do is 'sanctified action.'" Holiness is located not in our separation from the difficulties of reality, but precisely in our bearing reality, even when it is difficult.

This Lent, may God's Spirit move among us, opening our eyes to see the holy not just in the special times and special places, but everywhere and in all things. Including ourselves.