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HISTORICAL SERIES, 11

We Are Earthen Vessels Carrying God's Treasure

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(The Rev. Cynthia ["Cindy"] Halmarson is the third Bishop of the Saskatchewan Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada, having succeeded Bishop Allan A. Grundahl in that ministry in 2002. Prior to that she had served as the Assistant to the Bishop of the Saskatchewan Synod , 1994 to 1996, and as the Assistant to the National Bishop of the ELCIC, 1996 to 2002. Born and raised in Bristol, Connecticut, U.S.A., she moved to Canada in 1978 and graduated from Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon. This sermon was preached at a 2003 Conference Convention in the Saskatchewan Synod.)

Text: 2 Corinthians 4:5-18

Grace and peace to you in the name of the Triune God.

St. Paul gives us our theme today. Paul is writing to a splintered and quarrelsome church in Corinth. He uses the image of earthen vessels: clay jars, fragile, porous, easily broken. He speaks of trials, affliction, and persecution. Of being struck down but not destroyed. Clay pots. Cracked pots. Carrying the treasure of the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Clay pots. Cracked pots. A good theme for us at this time.

We gather today as a Christian community humbled by our loss of status in society. There was a time when the churches assembled were the community. Those were the days of temperance and blue laws, days when the morality of the citizens was dictated by the morality of the dominant religious group, the Christian Church. In days past the census count never revealed non-Christians in our area, and precious few admitted that they belonged to no church. Today synagogues, mosques, and temples are listed along with Christian churches in the "Church Organizations" section of the Yellow Pages. Bahá'í, Hindu, Jewish, and Sikh might be listed in your Yellow

Pages, and some may be unlisted if their numbers are small or they fear persecution. Our community has grown diverse in its breadth of religious expression and practice.

Those who established the Christian Churches in Saskatchewan came by immigration through the United States or directly from Europe. There was a time when European immigrants dominated the political and social landscape. Read the history and discover our provincial roots in the settlers from Great Britain, other European countries, and later the Ukraine. Today we share our communities with people from cultures the world over, including First Nations people who were here before the Northern Europeans came. Local festivals celebrate the food, dance, handicrafts and stories of many of the cultures which live around and among us today. A look at business and professional directories will show a rich diversity of names coming from every continent and many, many countries.

The dominant ethic used to be Judeo-Christian. The Bible would be quoted in courts, schools, and city hall. Children would learn the Golden Rule as a Christian principle to guide relationships with others. Because the Christian Church bore so much social and political weight, its members and leaders could expect to govern public opinion and dominate the ethics in civic and social life.

It seems that today the ethic has changed. While Christian people still learn about such biblical values as justice, compassion, and mercy, the world around us – including our own country – seems to be guided by values such as growth and profit. As our world shrinks even small towns in the middle of the Prairies are linked to business interests undergirded by multi-national corporate connections.

As the community of Saskatchewan we are enriched by a diversity of peoples, cultures, and religious expressions. As a Christian community we are humbled to accept the reality that we don't dominate political life. No longer can we flex our faith-motivated muscle and fix the laws of our land. Sunday shopping and sports, casinos and VLTs (*video lottery terminals* – Ed.) and lotteries – these are a few of the moral issues that vex us as Christian people.

We are truly humbled. The Christian Churches are no longer the arbiters of society. We have lost our entitlement to power and influence. We are clay jars, fragile, cracked, and under pressure. Cracked pots. Crackpots, some would say! Who would have guessed 50 years ago that the Churches would fall so far from glory?

Look at us gathered here today, a rag-tag remnant of the faithful. As St. Paul said to the Corinthians, we have nothing in us but the death of Jesus.

If the 20th century was “the Christian Century,” it is clear that the 21st century is shaping itself up to be something entirely different. One hundred years ago there was a great fervour to spread Christianity across the globe. We were going to bring the gospel from Europe and North America to far-flung countries and cultures, and to witness to all and sundry in their own language the glory that awaits those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord. We were passionate about this mission, spurred on by Jesus’ own words: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, teaching them.” In the Christian Century the World Council of Churches was born. Missionary societies gathered billions of dollars in offerings and sent thousands, maybe millions, of missionaries to Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Today the fastest growing segment of the Christian Church in the world is in Africa. Even Lutherans are adding to their numbers in African churches!

But we must acknowledge at the same time the growth of other world religions and the great window that stretches from northern Africa across Asia in which the Christian Church is but a nominal presence. Have we failed? Have we failed in world mission? Have we failed in witnessing to Jesus Christ here in our own familiar communities?

It is as St. Paul says. We have nothing in us but the death of Jesus. As Christians in the world today we carry no glory, no inherent influence, no power. We carry in our body nothing more than the first witnesses carried, that Jesus was crucified, died on the cross.

We have nothing but God’s own Son, crucified and forsaken. As we read in St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians, Jesus is the one who went forth to teach and preach not on the strength of his equality with God, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant. The Jesus to whom we witness left behind the glory of God to live and minister among us, to eat with the sinners, touch the unclean, and befriend the outcast. We have nothing to give to the world but Jesus who died for all. On the cross. No power. No mustered up enthusiasm. No fix-it-all energy. Just the cross.

And for Jesus it was enough. It was enough to become the suffering servant for the world. It was enough to give his life for the sake of the world God loves. Jesus said, “Those who want to save

their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

As a Christian Church we carry in our body the death of Jesus. And it is enough for us to believe that Jesus died for all, and enough for us to witness to Jesus who died for all. Because in the death of Jesus is the life of the world. Jesus’ death is God’s promise for the world, God’s promise to be with us as weak and powerless as we are ... so weak and powerless that we can’t help but sin against God and others.

In the life of Jesus God joined us in our life. And in the death of Jesus God took on our death and turned it to new life – life lived in the forgiveness and grace of God. We have received the witness of the women at the tomb, of apostles who spread the word, of St. Paul himself who encouraged the early churches and all the faithful down the ages who have told us the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The death of Jesus is the life of the world. Through Jesus’ death we can see God’s love shining in the face of Jesus Christ, bringing people to faith and giving hope in the midst of weakness and brokenness. Cracked pots, yes. *Crackpots*, maybe. Forgiven and loved by God, certainly! We have this treasure, the treasure of God’s grace and love in the clay jar of Jesus’ death, who was broken for us and whose death gives life to the world. This is good news!

So we do not lose heart. The death of Jesus in us becomes life in others as we tell and live what we believe. You and I, we who have heard the good news, we follow where Jesus has already led. We believe, and so we speak, and do, and live, because we know that the death of Jesus is life for the world. Like Jesus we empty ourselves. We don’t proclaim ourselves, our strengths, our denomination, our power and influence in society. We empty ourselves as Jesus did, not counting on our dominance and political weight, but taking the form of a servant to those who are also broken, weak, and in need of God’s grace, mercy and love. As servants we have a multi-faceted ministry in our community.

We Christians have a ministry to those who have not heard the gospel. We believe and so we speak to our neighbours about the gospel with its promise of forgiveness and grace. We proclaim from our pulpits, teach in our Sunday Schools, and talk to our neighbours about the good news we have experienced in the face of Jesus Christ. This is a part of our ministry, a ministry of witness and invitation.

We have a ministry of hospitality. After all, we have nothing but the death of Jesus in us. We can afford to be hospitable. More than

that, we are compelled to be gracious to the stranger in our midst. Believing the gospel of Jesus Christ, we can speak with hospitality and warmth with neighbours of other faiths. Humbled and emptied, we can learn to see as guests those who live with us in our community, seeking their friendship and discovering our common call to a ministry of justice, peace, and well-being for all.

We also join with other Christian Churches and with persons of other faiths in shared ministry for the sake of the poor and marginalized in our community, working for justice, peace, and well-being for all. Because we believe, we live what we have received: compassion, grace, mercy. Out of the death of Jesus in us, our common ministry becomes life in others, life as concrete as shelter for the homeless, food for the hungry, education, meaningful work, and a safe place for all to live. Can we find ways to work together as neighbours and friends to achieve wholeness and abundant life for all?

As a body carrying the death of Jesus in us, we are a serving people, praying for and working for others, open to learn their needs, open to put their needs before our own, becoming servants of others for their sake. We believe and so we speak. Inviting others to know Jesus, to join us in being raised with him. Being hospitable to our neighbours. Working together for life abundant for all.

Today we gather as cracked pots, bearing in us the death of Jesus for the sake of the world. As we pray together, and as we go from this place, we go emptied of ourselves, emptied of our power, emptied of everything but the death of Jesus. By God's grace our Church will be a witness to our community that we proclaim not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as servants in his name.

Pray for the ministry we share as witness of his death for us and witness to the life he gives to the world. Pray that our eyes will be opened to see the ones Jesus came to love, that we will see the abundant life he came to give to all people, and that each one of us will find our individual and common ministry that makes the death of Jesus to become life in others. Amen.