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Imagine you find a treasure. Maybe you were cleaning out a deceased relative's house and came across a jar of ancient coins or discover a book of mint condition old stamps. You're faced with the dilemma of what to do with them. You're not sure of their value, so you hesitate to tell anyone about them, but you stash them in a closet of your house. Over the years you forget about them until one day a family member helps you clean out your closet.

"Wow. Where did you get these? Do you know how rare these are?"

"I found them while cleaning out my aunt's house, and I put them in here since I wasn't sure what to do with them. So, you didn't even know you had a treasure in your closet?"

We may forget about the potential treasures among us as we stash things away, which seems to be a practice that occurred even in ancient times, as amateur treasure hunter Nick discover 11 years ago while using his new metal detector in Shrewsbury, England. He found a large clay pot filled with 10,000 Roman coins dated between the years 240

and 320, a treasure buried for 1700 years. Being his first treasure hunt, he was quite surprised to find such a stash buried in a farmer's field.¹

It seems that putting coins in clay jars was a common practice back then, especially during times of war or instability. They may have even buried coins as a ritual offering. These buried coins in clay jars have been called coin hoards, and archaeologists have discovered thousands of such treasures.²

The practice was so common that Jesus told a parable about a man who found a treasure buried in his field that he sold everything to purchase the field (Matt. 13:44), using the story to illustrate the kingdom of heaven. The Greek word translated as "treasure" is θησαυρός (*thesauros* /*thay·sow·ros*), meaning a treasury or storehouse for valuable things. Interestingly, we get the English word *thesaurus* from this Greek word, for our language is filled with a valuable treasury of stories and ideas.

This Greek word is the same word Paul used in his letter to the church in Corinth when he wrote,

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“we have this treasure in clay jars.” Maybe he was thinking of these coin hoards, fragile clay jars filled with an abundance of valuable coins.

When Paul used this imagery, he seemed to be referring to the fragility of our bodies, for he wrote, “We are experiencing all kinds of trouble, but we aren’t depressed. ⁹We are harassed, but we aren’t abandoned. We are knocked down, but we aren’t knocked out...¹⁶So we aren’t depressed. But even if our bodies are breaking down on the outside, the person that we are on the inside is being renewed every day.”³

He suggested that those early followers of Jesus carried the experience of Christ’s death within them, for he knew their lives were at risk as followers of Jesus. Before becoming a follower of Jesus himself, Paul had hunted down other Christians to destroy them. After his decision to join them rather than persecute them, he spent time in jail for his radical trust in Jesus. Since Paul knew the risk of following Jesus, he suggested that we carry

the experience of Jesus’ pain within us, but he also suggested that we carry the *life* of Jesus within us.

In other words, even though our bodies may suffer, we still have the treasure of Christ within us through the Spirit of God’s presence. Isn’t that amazing? Christ lives within you! The Spirit of God moves in you!

We may especially feel like fragile jars during these days of COVID-19. News reports tell us daily of how many people have been affected and how many have died. Beginning Monday, here in Indiana we will be required to wear face masks in public, along with many other states. We may wonder how a coronavirus smaller than a red blood cell can create so much chaos and destruction in the world, leaving us feeling as vulnerable as clay jars waiting to be dropped and smashed into pieces.

Clay jars were used for everything 2000 years ago, not only for storing hoards of money, but also for transporting wine in clay containers known as amphorae (AM-for-eh). As one writer explained:

They were the mass-market beverage containers of the ancient world...two-handled clay jars used by... merchants to transport wine. Some amphorae were glazed and intricately decorated...[though] most were not, having been fashioned from [common] red clay.

The typical amphora when full weighed about 100 pounds. Sailors would stack them by the dozens in the holds of their ships, lacing ropes through the twin handles to stabilize them in rough seas.

Once the amphorae had been delivered to their destination and their contents consumed, no one bothered shipping the empties back to their point of origin. It wasn't economical to do so: amphorae were cheap and plentiful. It was easier just to smash them. There's a hill in Rome...more than 100 feet high and [half a mile] in circumference. It's not a natural hill at all. It's an ancient trash heap, composed of the fragments of nearly 53 million amphorae!⁴

We may feel as common and ordinary as amphorae clay jars, but rather than comparing ourselves to disposable jars tossed aside, I think we are more like another kind of clay jar—the clay pottery used as an oil lamp. In the letter Paul wrote, he referred to the creation story in Genesis: “God commanded light to shine in the dark.’ Now God is shining in our hearts to let you know that his glory

is seen in Jesus Christ” (4:6 CEV). You see, when God created humanity, God breathed life into us with God’s breath. We are the fragile vessels that contain God’s gift of the Spirit, which Jesus later reminded us is filled with God’s light when he said, “You are like light for the whole world...no one would light a lamp and put it under a clay pot. A lamp is placed on a lampstand, where it can give light to everyone in the house. Make your light shine, so that others will see the good that you do and will praise your Father in heaven” (Mt. 5:14-16).

Recently youth in the Elkhart County juvenile justice system had a chance to let their light shine as they drew chalk drawings on the walls of an outdoor recreation area illustrating the question, “What would a peaceful world look like to you?”

“Their artistic interpretations included themes like the end of war, the end of gun violence, the centrality of love, the importance of faith and the value of life.”⁵ They had the opportunity to show their artwork to local community leaders, who then

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had the opportunity to tell the youth about their own work.

In a sense, the project invited adults and struggling youth to recognize the light among them, to let their light shine out of their clay jars with the brilliance of hope.

Isn't that what each of us is invited to do as well, to let Christ's light shine through our lives? That light of hope is even more important these days when we feel more and more isolated from one another. It's tempting to think, "Oh well, this is the

new normal, and there's nothing I can do about it," but there *is* something you can do. May you find creative ways to let your light shine through your fragile jars, and in doing so, bring hope to the world, for God still moves among us. Those around us so desperately need to see this light of hope shining through your clay jar.

¹ "10,000 Roman coins unearthed by amateur metal detector enthusiast... on his first ever treasure hunt," 9/9/09, www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1212031/10-000-Roman-coins-unearthed-amateur-metal-detector-enthusiast-treasure-hunt.html

² Mark Wilson, "Treasures in Clay Jars," 9/25/13, www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-artifacts/artifacts-and-the-bible/treasures-in-clay-jars/

³ 2 Corinthians 4:8-9, 16, CEB

⁴ www.homileticsonline.com, 6/3/18.

⁵ Jordan Fouts, "Kids in juvenile justice create chalk art," *The Elkhart Truth*, June 27-28, 2020.