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The Gospel Treasure

2 Corinthians 4:7

A highlight of my trip to England last summer was a visit to the Bodleian Library at Oxford University. I had been to the Bodleian before but this time was different. This time I was not going as a tourist. I was going to do research. I went to the Bodleian web site to learn about the process of being admitted as a reader. The process was fairly extensive. There was a written application. A professor had to sign a form endorsing my research and vouching for my character. When I arrived in Oxford I reported to the Bodleian admissions office with these documents in hand and a personal interview was conducted. When the interviewer was satisfied I was photographed for a picture I.D. card. Then the climactic moment came when I was asked to stand and read aloud the Bodleian Library declaration which says:

I hereby undertake not to remove from the Library, nor to mark, deface, or injure in any way, any volume, document, or other object belonging to it or in its custody; not to bring into the Library, or kindle therein, any fire or flame...

Then the gates of paradise were opened and I was permitted to review the 17th century correspondence of the Bishop of London on the plight of Huguenot ministers in England. The extensive process that I had undergone had a very serious purpose. It was about preserving and providing access to a very great treasure.

In the fourth chapter of 2 Corinthians Paul describes his describes himself as a steward of an even great treasure. In this passage Paul is addressing critics who question his qualifications for ministry. We do not know exactly what it was that led some people to challenge Paul's leadership. He clearly did not meet their expectations of what a leader in the church was supposed to be and do.

Paul chose not to respond to his critics by defending his performance and ministry skills. Instead he wrote of the purpose of ministry. Ministry happens where human need and the divine presence intersect. It is at that intersection that lives are changed by the gospel. To do ministry means giving of ourselves so that others may experience this treasure.

The point that Paul wanted to drive home is that ministry is not about those who do it. It is about the gospel treasure that God has given to us. Paul writes, "But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us (2 Corinthians 4:7)." Paul uses the image of the clay jar to underscore the weakness and fragility of the messengers. His readers will understand that cheap clay pots are often used in their culture to store valuable objects. No one should be surprised by Paul's shortcomings as a minister. He is not the treasure. He is nothing more than the clay pot. What matters is Paul's willingness to be a steward of the gospel treasure which has the power to change lives.

This life-changing treasure is at the heart of the 10th chapter of Mark's gospel. There Jesus is approached by a successful young man. This young man has already achieved most of his goals in life. Now he is wondering if this is all there is. He has come to Jesus struggling with a profound sense of emptiness. He has learned that material things do not satisfy. He says to Jesus, "What must I do to

inherit eternal life (Mark 10:17)?" Jesus reminds the young man of the commandments by which we respond to the treasure of the gospel that God has given to us. The young man replies that he has lived by them.

Jesus recognizes the sincerity of the young man's quest. He looks at him with compassion. Then he invites the young man to let his life be transformed by the treasure that God has given him. He says, "Go sell what you own, and give the money to the poor...then come follow me (Mark 10:21)."

Jesus challenges the young man to embark on a journey which is not about him. It is about the treasure that God has extended to him. Material things are no longer for his consumption and amusement. They are the means to help those who are in need. If he wants to move beyond the emptiness of his life he must learn to give as God has given to him.

In June of 2006 art collector Ronald Lauder made a major investment in one of the great treasures of the art world. He gave the highest price ever paid for a painting. He purchased Gustav Klimt's 1907 portrait of Adele Bloch Bauer I for 135 million dollars. This painting is now on display as the centerpiece of Lauder's Neue Gallery in New York City. In an interview Lauder was asked why he loves that painting so much. He replied by telling the story of the artist. Gustav Klimt had achieved considerable notoriety during the early part of his career in Vienna. But then he took a trip that changed his life and transformed his work.

Klimt traveled to Ravenna, Italy where he saw the Byzantine mosaics in the Church of San Vitale. The dramatic use of color and visual impact of the faces of the 6th century Byzantine royal court of the emperor Justinian captivated Klimt's imagination. As Lauder told his story I could visualize what happened to Klimt. I remember the impact those mosaics had on me when I went to Ravenna with a WPC choir group in 1997. It was Ken Lawrence who made sure that we saw those mosaics and understood why they were important. Lauder pointed out that the face of Adele Bloch Bauer in Klimt's painting is a creative interpretation of the face of the Empress Theodora from the Ravenna mosaic. His complex ornamentation and use of gold leaf were clearly inspired by what he saw in Ravenna.

After experiencing those mosaics Klimt saw himself and his work in a different way. He had a new vision of what art could be and do. His work was transformed and so was the world of art. The Adele Bloch Bauer portrait inaugurated a revolutionary new approach to painting.

And so it was for the wealthy young man in Mark's gospel. Jesus tells him that he is in effect already on his trip to Ravenna and nothing will be the same for him again.

It is no different for us. The gospel treasure that has been entrusted to us makes everything different. We can no longer be defined by the accumulation of material goods. Our calling is to participate in the extraordinary generosity of God.