

“Strong in Our Brokenness”
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As I said, this treasure in clay jars is each one of us and that description was given because clay jars were what they had to work with. They worked with the mud, and they put it together to form these jars that held water, that held wine – [that] provided life. But they didn’t last very long. They broke easily and over time they just disintegrated. And Paul, or the writers of 2 Corinthians, used that as a description for us: we break down easily, spiritually as well as physically. We struggle and over time we will decay and we will die.

But, while we are existing in this world we can do great things. We can hold the very power of God within us, the same way those clay jars held the communion bread and cup – held the wine of Christ in those very simple clay jars. I think about that and I’m comforted by it. It was very hard for me to become ordained, because I didn’t think I was worthy. I didn’t feel like I had the ability, or the temperament, or anything else to be that way, and it took someone coming to me and telling me none of us are perfect. One of my pastors, who was one of my professors, reminded me that it is those who are the most-humble who make the greatest pastors. And, if you think you are great and perfect and God’s gift to ministry you are probably the least. That gave me the confidence to go ahead.

When I think about people who fulfill that image of the clay jar besides myself, I think of a man named Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Some of you were actually around to remember that. (I kind of missed that part.) But for those of us who were not around, then I would like to tell you a little about him and how he fits that description.

At first glance, you might not have thought that Franklin Delano Roosevelt would be a clay jar. He had everything. He came from a very wealthy family who had great influence. In fact, his fifth cousin was Teddy Roosevelt, the previous president of the United States. So, when Franklin was raised, he was raised in the greatest schools. He went to a Groton School, which is where Teddy went, and where some of the wealthiest people in the entire country went to school. Then he went to Harvard College and then was a graduate of Columbia Law School. He had amazing, amazing ability and everything was handed to him. So, why in the world am I talking about this “clay jar” when I’m talking about Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt?

Well, life wasn’t always easy for him. He had everything laid out, until he struggled mightily. The first struggle he had was in marrying Eleanor. Eleanor was an amazing woman, but their relationship never worked out. They never quite made that connection and, while they had five or six kids, there wasn’t much intimacy in that relationship; so over time he did some things that were inappropriate, and he had a relationship with other women. One other woman was Eleanor’s social secretary, and they were together for many years. When Eleanor found out, she kept her distance. They [Eleanor & Franklin] never split officially, but they were always at a distance and they kept their relationship civil - but distant - for social and political reasons; and, in that regard, Franklin Roosevelt *was* a clay jar. He didn’t live up to the faith that he had been raised with - his Episcopalian faith - and he struggled with that his entire life. He truly was a clay jar.

But you can be vulnerable and weak in other ways, as well, and Franklin Roosevelt knew what that meant. He had become the assistant of the United States Navy. He had so much power. Then, all of a sudden, in April of 1921 he started feeling feverish. He struggled with movement issues and soon he became fully paralyzed from the waist down. Now, this was in the 1920s and '30s, and he sat down one night with very little hospital care; they didn't know what happened. In fact, doctors today believe he was misdiagnosed, and that was one of the reasons he didn't heal any better than he did.

But he wasn't going to let that issue get in the way of the calling he believed God had for his life. So, he figured out, with the help of the doctors, how to put braces on his hips and his legs; and, if he flipped his torso violently, he could move his legs enough to walk at least a few steps to be able to move himself forward. He made sure that no one photographed him in his wheel chair – where he spent almost all of his time – and, kids, that was before Twitter, and before Facebook, and phones, where everyone has a camera. You could hide things easier then: the good old days. [Laughter.]

When he spoke, he would always be held up by either one of his aides or one of his sons. He tried very hard for people not to know and, in that day and age, he had a relationship that was such with the media, that they didn't really encourage people to know exactly how incapacitated he was physically, to do the physical part of his job. And it worked.

He first became governor for the state of New York, from 1929 to 1932, when the whole country became a clay jar, because - for those of you who have looked at your history a little bit - in 1929 was the stock market crash, and then we went into the Great Depression. And he was the governor of the state that was going to be in some of the most difficult moments of the entire country - and he carried them with hope so great amidst so much of a problem. In our age, as well as in that age, we usually blame our politicians when things don't go our way - even when they aren't doing anything wrong, or even when they can't do anything about it; but, we still blame them because we have to blame someone. But, they didn't blame Franklin Roosevelt because he had a way of showing the state at that time (and later the entire country) that he was trying, and that it was bigger than any one person - but he would try harder and work smarter than anyone else. At least that is what they believed or he could get them to believe. So, by the end of 1932 he was ready to be President of the United States. And he was elected President of the United States and his Inauguration was March 4, 1933, in the *worst* time.

Just think about how frail those clay jars were in our country. At that time [there was] 25 percent unemployment. This month, in our country, our unemployment is at 3.8 percent, and I talked to people from DMARC and CROSS Ministries this week, both of whom are talking about the need being so great - not because the unemployment is so great, but the *underemployment* is so great. People have jobs, but they are not enough to provide for their families, and more food is needed, more aid so they can get electricity back on, because they shut it down when spring came.

All of these problems from underemployment, and the unemployment rate when Franklin took over was 25 percent - and we won't even begin to talk about underemployment. Two *million* people were homeless and there were no opportunities to provide aid outside of churches and compassionate individuals. It was catastrophic. Thirty-two of the 48 states, and the District of Columbia, had shut down and closed their banks. That is what Franklin

Delano Roosevelt walked into. Man, I don't know if I would have even gone to work, and yet this very vulnerable clay jar - physically and emotionally and spiritually in ways already described - came up with amazing plans, with the help of others, working with others together on both sides of the aisle. You know, maybe things have to become that bad before Republicans and Democrats will sit down together. And they formed, under Franklin Delano Roosevelt's leadership, the FDIC, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Federal Communication Commission and Social Security, just to name a few.

Think about that. Those four we continue to use and buffer us today. Roosevelt said we need Social Security, because we cannot be a country with any integrity, if we do not care for the least of those. We are only as strong as our weakest link and the weakest link in any society are the elderly, the sick and those in desperate need - the poor. And, Social Security, the FDIC, fixing the Securities and Exchange Commission - communicating it properly - all of those ways will help to fix our nation, not in just this Depression, but from every time forward. And he was absolutely right.

Scholars, now, talk about Franklin Delano Roosevelt as one the three finest Presidents, standing side-by-side with George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. That wasn't all, but that's enough. But this very fragile clay jar of a person was President during World War II. Now, he didn't do everything right. He remained a clay jar. He was very concerned about his own political well-being and he had to deal with the isolationists. He had to deal with prejudice against the Jewish community, and anti-Semitism, and sadly he did not respond nearly fast enough in dealing with the genocide that was taking place in Germany, Poland and Europe. And so many lives could have been saved if he had responded faster, and had been less concerned about his own political well-being, and more about this huge group of people who were being wiped out.

Franklin, as a form of rationale or rationalization, said, "I won't take America into war over one group of people," but look at the other things that this man did. He was in constant negotiations with Europe, even when many in the United States wanted us to be as far away from their war, and he continued to communicate and prepare the nation for what he saw as an inevitable war. He continued to negotiate and communicate with our people, so that they would know what was happening in Europe and how it may affect them and, then, you all know what happened on December 7, 1941, when Japanese bombs blew up Pearl Harbor. It was his words that calmed and ignited our country, "This is a day that will live in infamy," and formulated the country that fast, because Roosevelt was preparing for every eventuality - including the war. And his clay jar prepared and provided the preparation for the first atomic bomb.

Right or wrong, now the entire world became a clay jar, but he knew that it was better for a democracy to have that power, than for Nazi Germany to have that power. He struggled with that, over and over, day and night, until it took a toll on his health. He continued to decline until April of 1945, when he finally succumbed, and his clay jar disintegrated into death.

Like Moses, who did so much, put up with so much, but couldn't see the Promised Land that he had worked for his entire life; Franklin Delano Roosevelt went through the Depression, led us into and through the war - and just weeks before the end of the war, he dies and is not able to celebrate his victory.

That is a human story. It is a story of very vulnerable clay jars. It is a vulnerable story of a man who made mistakes - huge mistakes. It is a man who tried and failed, in many ways, to live his faith. It is a story of a man who could not have the physical strength, but made himself strong in the eyes of others, and God chose to use this man anyway.

Apostle Paul was so much the same way. He had a stutter. He abused the Christians and then became one of them, but even the early Church didn't trust him, because maybe he was just a spy – and, yet, that is who God chooses?

So, God can choose the Apostle Paul. If God can choose a man who needs braces on his hips, who had committed adultery, who had made a number of ill-conceived decisions and then use him to guide the country - the greatest country in the world - through its Great Depression and through the second World War, then perhaps, just perhaps God can use this very fragile clay jar, that very fragile clay jar, that very fragile clay jar [pointing out into the congregation] and every other fragile clay jar in this room. Don't let anyone say you are not good enough. When they do, you will say, "That's right, and maybe that's why God might use me." It is in our weakness, it is in our mistakes, it is in our sinfulness that God chooses us. Not because we have earned it, but because if God uses little old you and me. Then everyone will know it couldn't have been because of us - the Spirit of God had to be at work.

I think that's why God chose Moses, the Apostle Paul and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and why God will continue to use you and me to transform this world that is more fragile each and every day. That is why we pray. That is why we worship each week, and that is why we keep going forth in trust. Amen.