

have a grand and perfect life; it is still to know death, disappointment, and hardship. And also to know that Christ interacts with all of those and often reshapes them into something new. It's quite a paradox, but so much of faith is.

Each of our stories are unique. We all have hardships, challenges, and griefs that we have borne in the past and that we are feeling even today. Some of those are personal and some are communal. Today, our congregation gave thanks for the ministry of our 9am Sunday worship service and we brought that ministry to a close. As we worshiped together for the last time at 9am, we remembered the good news of this passage. And we departed, seeking to live it out.

Whatever each of us are feeling today, we can all seek to live it out: Asking God to take the pieces of our hearts that are hurting or maybe even broken, and put them back together in the kintsugi way. Our pain can be on display in those cracks. But those cracks will show up with the glimmer of gold, with the light of Christ shining through. Those cracks reveal both the death of Jesus and the life of Jesus, which are all part of our story of faith. So as we go forth today, I pray that each of us can give thanks for the fullness of our story, and that we can see the light of Christ glinting around us. I pray we can be honest about our hurts as also we hear God offering us that “however,” that “but not,” which points us toward the future, toward a new life in Christ that shows our flaws as well as the power of God at work through them.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

- 1 Suleika Jaouad, “Considering Lilies with Suleika Jaouad,” *The Corners* by Nadia Bolz-Weber, May 27, 2024.
- 2 Claudio Carvalhaes, “Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World, 2 Cor 4:5-12,” *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Vol 3* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021), 45.
- 3 Claudio Carvalhaes, 47.
- 4 David W. Johnson, “Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture, 2 Cor 4:5-12,” *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Vol 3* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021), Carvalhaes, 45.
- 5 Info on kintsugi from <https://www.britannica.com/art/kintsugi-ceramics> and <https://traditionalkyoto.com/culture/kintsugi/>



First Presbyterian Church  
of Royal Oak

June 2, 2024

Second Sunday after Pentecost

“The “but not” of God”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:5-12

One year after she graduated from college, Suleika Jaouad learned that she was living with acute myeloid leukemia. Instead of pursuing her plan to become a foreign news correspondent, she found herself becoming a cancer patient. She endured four years of treatment and a bone marrow transplant. Suleika recovered her health and has since written a memoir, and if you have Netflix, her show “*American Symphony*” may have come up as a suggestion for you to watch. It’s a documentary with her husband, the band leader and musician Jon Batiste, which shows a year in their life as artists sharing highs and lows and a lot of creativity.

It was that creativity that changed Suleika’s experience of cancer. She writes, “At the beginning [when I was diagnosed], I felt so much despair, as if my life was over before it had begun. But about a year in, at the suggestion of a college friend, my family and I embarked upon a 100-day project, where we all did one creative act every day for 100 days.”<sup>1</sup> Her dad wrote down stories of his life growing up in Tunisia. Her mom made ceramic tiles that she hung above her daughter’s bed, as a kind of protective force. Suleika herself wrote in her journal each day. It was these creative acts, done in community, that changed the way Suleika experienced that awful time. The Spirit at work through creativity modified what she felt. She says, “Writing became a portal to make meaning of my circumstances and grapple with my mortality.” Two years ago, when her cancer returned, Suleika again sought a practice to reshape her experience of returning to treatment. This time, she chose watercolors, which taught her something new about surrender and rejoicing in happy accidents. Being creative did not take away the pain or change what Suleika had to endure, but it gave her a way to make meaning of it.

Paul describes how God’s presence in Christ modifies our experiences. When the light of Christ shines in our hearts, it modifies what we see, what we experience. In fact, it can change everything. As theologian Claudio Carvalhaes writes, “Paul’s theology is deeply marked by God’s modifiers,

for Paul knew God was the one who modifies our lives in Jesus Christ.”<sup>2</sup> God is present through our hardest situations, modifying, changing, transforming the way we experience them. God speaks into the hardship a ‘yet’, an ‘although,’ a ‘but not,’ a ‘however.’ ensuring that the terrible thing does not get the final word; it does not get to define everything. This is like Suleika, who felt crushed by her diagnosis, *but not* destroyed. Using God’s gift of creativity allowed her some sense of healing, of comfort. As Carvalhaes says, “It is the Holy Spirit who gives us the possibility to...know the transfiguring reality of Jesus Christ.”<sup>3</sup> As people of faith in whose lives the glory of God is already at work, we can say:

I am struggling right now, but I am not totally broken.

My loneliness is so pervasive, yet I know I am not alone. God is with me.

The world is coming apart before our eyes, *but in spite of that*, we trust that God is always making things new.

The person I love most in the world is really sick, *however* our love is only deepening.

The light of Christ that shines out of the darkness indeed transforms our experiences. But we must be careful that this is not in a pollyanna-ish way. The grace of Christ is not the same as optimism, or looking on the bright side, or finding a silver lining. That light does not flip a switch and make us feel fine about whatever struggle or hardship we are experiencing, or a trauma we have endured. This is not a flippant transformation. It is a transformation that acknowledges the true reality of pain, and yet sees that so often, God is doing something with that pain in us; or among us. God is not leaving us mired in trouble, but is there with us in it, which cannot help but modify our experience of it. This extraordinary power of transformation belongs to God alone, as we encounter God in our own lives, or in our life together, as a community.

Paul says we hold this gift of transformation in “clay jars.” That metaphor is hard to understand today, when we don’t use clay jars. But in Paul’s time, clay jars were commonplace items, not fancy, just practical storage containers. They were relatively cheap, could break easily and be replaced easily. As one commentary says, a modern-day metaphor might say, “we have this treasure in tin cans.”<sup>4</sup> The tin cans were the apostles themselves, those who were ministering to this early community. But *our* bodies are like theirs too. Our flesh and bones cannot contain God’s amazing grace in Christ. Nor do our limited powers and gifts measure up to what God can and does do. If we think of our lives as containers though—containers for all that we experience, containers for the goodness of God that we know—then maybe neither *clay jar* nor *tin can* get us to the right image.

There is a traditional Japanese technique of repairing broken ceramics called kintsugi. A legend explains the origin of it. And as legends go, it may or may not have roots in actual history and it may reveal other things about the world as we imagine it. The legend says that in the 15th century, a military ruler, shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa, had a damaged tea bowl that he wanted fixed. So he sent it to China to be repaired. When he received it back, it had been fixed with metal staples. Basically thin pieces of metal were inserted into small drilled holes in the vessel, on either side of the break, to hold the pieces in place. The tea bowl was in one piece again, but the staples were not pleasing to the eye. And tea ran right through it; the vessel could no longer serve its purpose. So Yoshimasa asked Japanese craftsmen to create a better, more beautiful way to repair broken ceramics.<sup>5</sup>

Kintsugi is what emerged. It’s a process of putting broken pieces of a pot or jar back together first with lacquer, and then with a metal powder, usually gold in color. The result is an intact vessel that shows its cracks, which have now been repaired and made beautiful. Each pot is unique, displaying the specific way its shards came apart and the careful way they have been put back together, with shimmering gold lines. The repaired vessel is watertight, able to be used once again.

Perhaps we ourselves, who started out as clay pots, have been modified to become kintsugi vessels. Perhaps the grace of God and the light of Christ shining in our lives have allowed the cracks of our lives to shimmer as gold. As humans, we are broken, but not ruined; cracked, but not destroyed. That’s part of the wonder of kintsugi art. It does not cover up the brokenness. The cracks are fully visible. But the cracks are not a mark of shame, they are an integral part of something brand new. So it is with our hardships, struggles, grief, and challenge. All of that becomes a part of us. With Christ at work in our lives, we do not need to hide anything that has happened to us. We incorporate all those cracks of life experience into the fullness of our lives. God works in and with all of them to modify what we’ve been through into something different, perhaps something healed. That never means that God makes the terrible things that have happened to us ok; it only means there is nothing beyond the reach of God’s ability to redeem it. With our cracks showing, but also touched by the glint of the glory of God, these vessels of ours are more valuable. The cracks tell the story of faith better than the original jar ever could.

Paul says in the passage that we always carry in our bodies the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible through us. The cracks in our kintsugi selves show that we know something of death. We do carry around the death of Jesus with us. To be a disciple is not to