

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

When I was in elementary school our teacher wanted us to experience a piñata. She hung one up and had us take turns swinging at it with a heavy stick. But, of course, she blindfolded the one taking the swings. The piñata was filled with candy, and so when it became cracked, some candy came out; and when it became completely busted, all the candy spilled out much to our delight.

What St. Paul is saying in our text is that he is a piñata; Paul and all his fellow workers. “*We have this treasure,*” he writes, “*in jars of clay.*” What treasure...candy? Oh no, a treasure far better than candy. The treasure of the Gospel. “*We proclaim...Jesus Christ,*” he says.

The treasure is everything; the container is nothing. Paul does not boast of himself; he boasts of Christ. “*We do not preach ourselves,*” he says, “*but Jesus Christ as Lord.*” And yet this treasure is not sitting out by itself, but is contained within a vessel. “*Jars of clay,*” is how he puts it. Clay is of the earth. It’s what a piñata is made of. A ceramic piñata is made of clay that has been fired in an oven.

There is only one way to get to the treasure contained within a piñata. If you want the candy, you must hit the piñata...hard. You have to really smack it so that it cracks open. Otherwise the candy remains sealed up within the piñata.

God never intended for the treasure of the Gospel within the Apostle Paul to remain sealed up. And so he was afflicted, is how Paul puts it, perplexed, persecuted, struck. Paul and his fellow workers were smacked hard. They were beaten, whipped, imprisoned, and much more. Satan did this to them. He gave his heavy stick to those who hated Paul, who hated Jesus. But actually this was God’s design all along. Because in order for the treasure Paul contained to come out and be given to others, he had to be beaten like a piñata. He had to be cracked open so that Jesus Christ would come pouring out of him.

It still works this way today. Those who are called to proclaim the Gospel are called to a life of suffering. We are, in effect, God’s piñatas. There can be no treasure, no Gospel freely given, unless the one who is called to serve undergoes suffering and persecution.

Now this does not mean that pastors, missionaries, and all who are to proclaim Christ need to be beaten regularly with heavy sticks. Those who beat Paul were not Christians. They were unwitting agents of the devil. Satan will see to it that God’s piñatas are smacked around. He does this because he hates God’s servants. God allows this because this is how the treasure of the Gospel is proclaimed in all its sweetness.

You know what a cruel joke it would be for children who are swinging at a piñata, and when it finally is busted open, if nothing were to come out because it was empty? How horrible for those children! How sad.

Far worse is the Christian who has nothing to give to others. Jesus Christ cannot come out of him because he, or she, simply is not filled with Christ. And so when he is struck like a piñata, instead of the treasure of the Gospel, what comes out is anger, threats, curses and foul language,

and revengeful retaliation. Tell me, if these had come out of Paul when he was persecuted, what kind of missionary would he have been?

What about you and me? There is no way we can be filled with Christ if we're hardly hearing His words and receiving His Sacrament. How many St. Louis Cardinals' players can you name? Compare that to how many prophets and apostles you can name. We fill ourselves up with the things of this world, but do we fill ourselves up with Christ and His Word? When we're struck like a piñata, what comes out of us...the treasure of the Gospel, or angry words, even foul language?

Jesus Himself was a piñata. He was hung up on a cross and was struck. Nails were driven into Him. Thorns were smashed into His head. Whips laced with metal smacked His back. Soldiers beat Him with sticks. And at the end a spear pierced His side. Did anger and loud cursing come out of Jesus? Just the opposite. Love, mercy, prayers of forgiveness. Jesus was filled with this.

And so the treasure of His blood poured out of Him as He was cracked open. Now His death means life for you. He was struck for our offenses, Isaiah writes. He hung there on a cross like a piñata completely broken...for you and me. This means that we rejoice in the treasure that we now are freely given.

And here it is on the altar. Here is the sweet candy from the piñata. Here is forgiveness, life, salvation for you. It is here for you because it poured forth from Jesus when He was struck.

The more you and I are filled up with Christ...in other words, the more we receive His Sacrament and hear, read, and study His words of life...the more Satan will see to it that we are struck, and struck hard. He has his ways of hurting us...physically, mentally, emotionally. He puts his heavy stick into the hands of those who serve him. And they swing away at you and me.

But when they do, if it is the treasure of Christ that fills us, then it is the treasure of Christ that spills out of us for others. And the more we are struck, the sweeter the Gospel that comes out.

Remember this, that those who swing with their stick at the piñata are blindfolded. They do not see that it's really God using them to pour out His grace upon sinners.

As I look around at each one of you, I see Christian piñatas. Some of you are wounded physically. Others of you are wounded emotionally. You've been battered, hurt by others, caged, struck, beaten down. But you have One who endured all this and so much more for you. He endured even the swings you and I have taken at Him. And He forgives. Everyone who took swings at Him, He forgives. He forgives you. Even for all the spilling out of anger and foul language, He forgives you for that.

And He fills you with Himself, with His life, His love, peace, joy, and hope. And so I see today Jesus' beloved piñatas. Cracked open here and there. And this is a beautiful thing. For the deeper the cracks, the sweeter is God's grace for you and for those you love and serve. Amen.