

Cracked Pots

When I was a little kid, my mother used to read to me. She'd read me stories of Winnie-the-Pooh. Now this was *before* Pooh got all Disney-fied and animated. These were A. A. Milne's original Pooh stories, all about Christopher Robin and Pooh Bear and their friends Piglet, Rabbit and Owl, Tigger, Kanga and Roo. And The Old Grey Donkey, Eeyore. One of my favorite stories is titled "In Which Eeyore Has a Birthday."

It starts off with Eeyore feeling sad because it's his birthday and no one has taken any notice of it. So Pooh decides that he simply must give Eeyore a present. But because Pooh is a bear of very little brain, all he can think of to give Eeyore is one of his beloved jars of honey. Pooh's intentions are good. He sets out for Eeyore's place, carrying a jar full of delectable honey. But on the way, it gets to be that time of day when Pooh Bear gets hungry for a little smackerel of something.

Well, you guessed it. Pooh polishes off every last bit of that honey. And then—suddenly and with great dismay—he realizes that he has *eaten* Eeyore's birthday present!

Bother! says Pooh. What shall I do? I must give him something. Then he thinks: *Well, it's a very nice pot, even if there's no honey in it, and if I washed it clean and got somebody to write "A Happy Birthday" on it, Eeyore could keep things in it, which might be Useful.*

And that's exactly what Pooh does. He gives that pot to Eeyore and wishes him many happy returns of the day. And as the story ends, we see Eeyore, happy as can be, putting things in and taking things out of his Useful Pot.

A useful pot is a good thing to have and a good thing to be. In more than one place, the Scriptures liken us human creatures to earthen vessels, to clay jars or pots. You and I are clay pots, made on the Potter's wheel. Each of us, I think, wants to be a *useful* pot.

But sometimes we feel just the opposite of useful. Sometimes we feel that what we have to offer is inadequate. Sometimes we feel that someone else does a better job at what we put so much effort into doing. Sometimes we feel that someone else is better equipped to do what needs to be done. Sometimes when we watch others, we see what looks to us like

perfection. We might even covet their talents and skills, and in comparison, see *ourselves* as hopelessly flawed.

This makes me think of a parable. Let me share it with you.

A water bearer in India had two large pots; one hung on either end of a pole which she carried across her shoulders. One of the pots had a crack in it, but the other pot was perfect, and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream to the master's house, while the cracked pot arrived only half full.

For a full two years this went on daily, with the water bearer delivering only one and a half pots full of water to her master's house. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments, perfect to the end for which it was made. But the poor cracked pot was very ashamed of its imperfection, and was miserable that it could accomplish only half of what it had been made to do—or so it thought.

After two years of what it perceived to be a bitter failure, the cracked pot spoke to the water bearer one day by the stream. "I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize to you."

"Why?" asked the water bearer. "What are you ashamed of?"

“For the past two years, I have been able to deliver only half my load, because this crack in my side allows water to leak out all the way back to the master’s house. Because of my flaws, you have to do all of this work, and you don’t get full value from your effort,” the cracked pot said.

The water bearer felt sorry for the old cracked pot, and in her compassion she said, “As we return to the master’s house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path.”

As they went up the hill, the old cracked pot did notice the sun shining on the beautiful wildflowers growing along *its* side of the path, and this cheered it some. But at the end of the trail, it still felt bad because it had again leaked out half its load. And so again the pot apologized to the water bearer for its failure.

The water bearer said to the pot, “Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of the path, and not on the other pot’s side? That’s because I have always known about your flaw, and I put it to good use. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back from the stream, you’ve watered them. For two years I have been able to pick those beautiful flowers to decorate my master’s table. Without

you being just the way you are, he would not have had this beauty to grace his house.”

Have you ever felt like that cracked pot? I know I have. When we compare ourselves to our companions, colleagues, and co-workers, they so often seem to have it all under control. They seem to be able to carry their load and make it look effortless.

And if that’s the way we see our contemporaries, how much more do we tend to revere the people we meet in the pages of the Bible? We put them up on a pedestal, don’t we? We picture them as committed, faithful, devout men and women who never struggled with self-doubt. But if we read their stories carefully, we begin to understand that they were subject to the same weakness and fragility that you and I are.

Take the Apostle Paul, for instance. A few minutes ago, you heard his words to believers at Corinth. Now you know that Paul wrote a considerable portion of the New Testament. And that this great Christian missionary spread the good news of Jesus Christ throughout most of the Gentile world. But Paul had a thorn in his flesh. We don’t know what it was he suffered from. But we know there was a flaw. There was a crack.

All sorts of cracks trouble us.

A longtime friend of mine plays the piano at our home church. She's served as pianist there since she was in her teens. But as the time draws near for her to sit down at the piano on Sunday morning, she gets nervous. She grows apprehensive that she'll make a mistake or that she won't do well in accompanying the organ. She becomes fearful that her gift isn't good enough.

But incredibly, when her fingers touch the keys, instead of diminishing the quality of her playing, that anxiety somehow evokes a poignancy, a passion, a loveliness in the sacred music that it would otherwise lack. Without the anxiety that she considers a flaw, there would be less beauty to grace the Master's house.

Don't all of us have flaws? Don't all of us have cracks? Without mine, I wouldn't be me. Without yours, you wouldn't be you.

You are the clay that has been carefully and lovingly shaped on the Potter's wheel. No two clay pots made on the Potter's wheel are identical. Each one is different. No one is exactly like you. You are unique. There's no one else in this world who can do what you do in just the way you do it!

So rather than questioning the Potter, rather than asking: *Why have you made me like this?*, turn yourself over to the One who fashioned you. And give thanks. Rejoice and be glad!

For you are fearfully and wonderfully made! You are the work of the Potter's hand—crafted to be a useful vessel. A useful pot.

And as you wait, as you listen for your call to the task appointed to you, rather than feeling discouraged, acknowledge each flaw and crack. For the Potter, who has always known about them, will use them—and use *you*—to grace this house and to grace this world. Will use you *despite* those cracks, and maybe even *because* of them.

Will use you for God's mighty purpose. A purpose that reveals the transcendent power and the amazing beauty and the eternal glory of God in Christ Jesus. This, beloved, is the treasure that fills you when you come today to your Master's Table. This is the treasure inside the clay pot that is you.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.