

KEEP SHINING *Radiant Reflectors*

2 Corinthians 4:1-7

November 9, 2025

"I wish it need not have happened in my time," said Frodo.

"So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time given us."

Friends, we live in difficult days of decision. The stakes are foundational, and the question before the Church is not subtle. Which light will we reflect? Whose image will we bear? Will we follow the Christ who emptied himself, or bow to the forces of fear? Will we honor souls or chase worldly gain? Will we become radiant reflectors of holy light or warped mirrors of a cruel age?

I need to quote Marilynne Robinson again. I know—it's becoming a bit of a running joke in our pastor meetings. Thanks to the work of one of our intrepid elderly members, I've started a pen-pal friendship with Dr. Robinson, one of the world's great writers, and here is my humbling discovery: her emails are every bit as luminous as her novels. Envy is the word I need. If I can't write like her, I can certainly quote her.

Robinson writes: "The concept of the soul is the profoundest possible bond among us, an unshakable basis for compassion, recognition and love which, acknowledged, would enable us to love enemies, welcome strangers, and all the rest."

What Robinson asks of us is reverence. Reverence. Not the stiff, stuffy kind, but the kind that arrests your attention. The kind that makes you notice a toddler clutching her mother's hand, or a neighbor's exhausted sigh at the end of a long day, and whispers to you, "This person matters. This moment is holy."

Reverence or fear. That's the choice before us. Reverence sees the soul. Fear sees the threat. Reverence loves the stranger. Fear turns away. Reverence trusts God's power. Fear grasps for our own.

And I do worry that we're losing the capacity for reverence. It's easy to see in the world out there. We're trained to categorize quickly. Notifications ping. Faces blur. We lose sight of the profound mystery of the image of God in the person next to us. If we cannot see each other—soul to soul—we cannot love each other.

The Church is not immune. Even in here, reverence can slip. Fear can take its place. We can be tempted to chase cultural power and call it zeal when it is only sanctified tribalism. We can miss the beauty of the holy hiding in plain sight. We can see the need of another and turn away. We can justify our indifference. Not my tribe. Not my people. Not my concern.

Paul writes to the Church, to Jesus followers facing intense cultural pressure to prove their power. He anchors his appeal in mercy. *Since it is by God's mercy that we're engaged in this work, we do not lose heart. God's light is shining in us. We have this treasure...in clay jars.*

Not in locked vaults. Not in fortresses behind walls. Held in the fragility of human clay.

Paul is under pressure. Critics in the church want a different leader. They want a leader who will project strength and certainty. They want power that looks powerful. And Paul refuses.

In fact, he doubles down. He says, "Yes, I'm weak. Yes, I'm fragile. Yes, I'm broken. And that's the point." God welcomes our weakness so no one claims credit for the extraordinary power that belongs only to God. In other words, the cracks in these earthen vessels aren't accidents; they are architecture, the architecture of grace.

Paul insists we don't proclaim ourselves. We proclaim Christ as Lord. In a cross-shaped community, inadequacy is no liability, it's the foundation for the glory of God.

And yet, we must confess that we'd often rather worship Caesar than Christ. Faith easily becomes a tool of domination, a public performance, a shield against vulnerability. We trade God's costly kingdom for our own comfort. We are enthralled by the wolf and ignore the shepherd.

Some in the Christian community embrace this vision. They wrap it in religious garb. They speak of "taking ground for Christ" while ignoring the hungry, the stranger, the vulnerable, the very ones Christ came to save and sends us to serve. Instead, cultural victory, tribal loyalty, personal brand-building become measures of faithfulness. The gospel is built as a platform or refashioned into a weapon. One word captures it. Fear.

Fear slips in like shadow. It says that neighbors are threats. It elevates narrow moralism above God's mercy. It demands uniformity, idolizes authority, and blurs ideology with theology. It isolates the hurting. It warps worship into a rally while reverence recedes and communities fracture.

People walk away. Not from Jesus, but from churches where fear, harshness, and tribalism block the light meant to shine through fragile vessels. Some find their way here.

One of them wrote me a few weeks ago, a former leader at another church in town. He stepped away when the tone grew too sharp and the words became too militant. He showed up here one Sunday and told me he wept through the entire service—not from sadness, but from relief. God renewed his hope in this place. I think I know the tears he shed. They signal freedom, release from religion that must fight to prove its worth.

What if God does not require our rage? What if God does not need our protection? What if we don't need to live in fear? What if the Church set down its sword?

There is another way. A church that proclaims Jesus—and no one else—as Lord. A church shaped by reverence, resisting fear. God does not need your defense. God demands your discipleship, people shaped by a story so dependent on God's power that it needs no human validation, so defined by reverence that it sees the sacred in each God-breathed soul.

It happens here. On Wednesday afternoons, volunteers gather before doors open to pray for families coming for groceries and grace. They gather to pray to remind themselves that every human being who will enter the doors of our food pantry is created in the image of God, deserving of our respect and our reverence. After worship, deacons will arrange flowers, crafted as a message of peace to somebody grieving the loss of a loved one. All week long, pastors will arrive in the early morning hours of hospital rooms to pray before surgery. Second graders will joyfully remember their baptisms and celebrate with a friend welcomed in these waters. Parents will make faith a priority in chaotic calendars. Greeters will ensure that every person crossing our threshold knows: *you belong here*.

I swear I saw God in a newly paved parking lot last week. Sunday night. It was getting dark, and I'm waiting for the buses to bring Samuel back from his first overnight retreat with our youth group. Eventually, the buses pull in, the doors open, and teenagers spill out, dragging their stuff behind them. They all have that unmistakable adolescent exhaustion in their faces. A ragged bunch. Bleary-eyed. Fragile for sure.

Putting on my most energetic voice, I asked, "How was it?" Reports came back, slowly at first: "Awesome. Amazing. So good. Definitely going again." Somebody chimed in, "Even the God parts were fun." Like you, I laughed. But then I stopped, and I looked at them, strangers one day earlier, now sitting on their bags shoulder to shoulder. And they were glowing from within. Look closely. A clay jar, every single one of them. Not generating light; but simply, unmistakably, gloriously reflecting light. Reverence evokes a response.

This moment demands a choice. Will we reflect the gospel or bow to fear? Will Christ be our light, or will we turn inward, hoarding grace while neighbors go hungry, the vulnerable unseen, the hurting abandoned?

Later in this letter, Paul reminds us: your abundance exists for others' need. Your clay jar holds treasure—not to store, but to share.

Yes, this is a commitment sermon. I'll tell you what we do. Our family tithes. We give ten percent. We've done it for years, and we try to share that practice with

our boys. Benjamin, age eight, recently pointed out—helpfully—that we would have more money for fun if we didn't give it away. He's right. But he also understands why we give.

Giving is not a bill we pay; it is a story we tell. A declaration that the light we've seen is the light we trust, come what may. That we are being formed by a story this world cannot tell. That life is not about accumulating—not money, not power, not stuff, not status. Here, we say life is about belonging to something larger than yourself. About living for a purpose beyond comfort.

Next Sunday, we will come together to commit ourselves afresh to this work of light.

Friends, let your giving tell the truth about the story you belong to. We have been entrusted with much. We must give accordingly. Not from guilt or obligation, but as an act of resistance to fear, a reflection of reverence.

You are jars of molded mud. Fragile, dependent, luminous with borrowed light. This moment is starving for your light—for those who will hold what is precious with gentle hands, who let their broken places become windows for God's light.

Reverence or fear. That's still the choice. And it's not easy. Loud voices claim to speak for God and say we should be afraid. Cruelty beats relentlessly against the soul, claiming that contempt is a Christian virtue. Not so. I have staked my life on this promise: that the world will not be redeemed by rage or fear. God grants them no power to save. The world turns on grace. Grace. The only story worth telling.

Reverence. Clay jars, glowing in the dark. Ordinary souls, daring to shine.

Second Church, let's go tell a better story.

Pray with me: God, give us eyes to see your image in each face. Make us reflectors of your light. Amen.