

Worth Boasting About

In the name of him who was regarded by his own as a prophet without honor, dear friends in Christ: We humans are born braggarts. Listen to the conversations of even the youngest children and you will invariably hear all about what each one can do better than any of the rest, or what they've got that's newer, faster, smarter, bigger, prettier, costlier, more powerful, versatile, knowledgeable, or fun than what the rest have got. And in response to each such assertion you'll hear either a challenge along the lines of, "No way. You're not as great as you think" or an admission of defeat coupled with a change of battlefield: "Yeah, but I can do *this* other thing better" or "my something else is better." On and on it goes, each one demanding to be recognized as the king of at least some mountain.

It doesn't really change as we age either. We simply turn to other mountains to be kings of. And, too, we learn to ratchet down the rhetoric a bit. No one likes a braggart, someone who's always going on and on about themselves and how wonderful they are. And yet we do love to boast. We just learn to do it more discreetly. Well, most of us do anyway. Some folks never do learn when to shut up. But even when we don't speak about it, we can't help doing the comparisons in our minds specifically seeking out the categories in which we can think of ourselves as superior: in what ways I'm better than you or you're not as good as me. We can't help it. It's part of our sinful condition.

And like any other sin, it becomes a real problem when it's allowed to run rampant in the church of Jesus Christ. This is at least part of the problem that St. Paul is addressing in today's Epistle lesson – although it may not sound like it from the way the reading begins. The way it starts, with Paul saying, "I must go on boasting", it sounds as if he's a major part of the problem. He's not; but to understand what he's saying, we have to back up a bit and put what he says in context.

So a little background: Paul first planted the Christian church at Corinth on his second missionary journey. He was there for a whole year and half – spending far more time in Corinth than in any other city he visited to date. And that's probably because they needed the most work. This is evident because ever since its inception this particular congregation has been his special problem child. I mean, if in a church something can go wrong, like misunderstand some basic points of doctrine, worship in the wrong way, mess up with the sacraments, or be all broken up into various factions vying for power and control, they had it. As a result, Paul has been carrying on a steady correspondence with them to correct their many errors. He's also sent his young protégé Timothy to them several times to try to straighten things out and report back to him with developments. But it's an ongoing battle with this contentious group of people. It's like fighting a forest fire in a hot dry wind. As soon as he puts it out in one place, flames break out in a half a dozen others.

And one of the most troubling fires that popped up in the congregation happened as a result of the arrival of the so-called super-apostles. Who were they? Well, it seems that whenever Paul started a new church in some place and then moved on to his next destination, the church he just left would be descended upon by self-appointed know-it-alls who claimed to know gobs more about Christianity and what it means to live the Christian life than poor Paul ever could. Typically they were, like Paul, people with Jewish roots and who had, therefore, a pretty good knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures. This gave them a decided advantage

over most of people in a place like Corinth where the congregation consisted largely of Gentile converts. They didn't grow up with the Holy Scriptures hearing about Moses and Abraham and David and the prophets. So it was easy for these newcomers to present themselves to the folks in the church as *the* Bible experts.

And this is what the folks would hear from them: "We've really got to hand it to Paul for getting you guys started in this whole Jesus thing ... but, there's just no other way to say this: Paul means well enough, but he really doesn't get it. We do. We have true spiritual wisdom. We possess God's special secrets. And we're here to set you straight. Paul may be an apostle of sorts; but we are the super-apostles."

What they were teaching seems to be a blend of early Gnosticism and Jewish legalism. The former tended to spiritualize the Scriptures, denying the goodness of creation and the truth of the bodily death and resurrection of Jesus. The latter imposed the Jewish ceremonial laws upon the Gentile Christians, telling them that in order to be saved they had to observe all the dietary restrictions, religious festivals, sacrifices, and what not that were part of God's covenant with Old Testament Israel. These teachings overthrow the Gospel completely. They deny what Christ has done for our salvation and put the burden on you to faithfully obey laws that have been abrogated under the new covenant.

Ah, but that's the problem. The sinful nature in us likes the idea of having to do something to earn salvation. It means I get to do my part. It means, in the end, I have something to boast about before God. So the teachings of the super-apostles fell on eager ears at Corinth. And the super-apostles had another advantage over Paul. They were classically trained orators. In Greek culture there was no one so popular as a guy who could hold a crowd spellbound by his well chosen words, his fine voice, and his flowery speech. The super-apostles had all that. Paul, on the other hand, was a very poor public speaker. He was a little guy, not much to look at, who spoke in a halting, wheezy voice. And the super-apostles made fun of him about it, telling the Corinthian Christians, "Surely you've noticed that in the letters he writes to you he sounds very confident and assertive – a real tiger; but in person, c'mon, he's nothing but a weak, mewling kitten. He doesn't look or sound at all like a real man of God."

In these and in other ways the super-apostles deceived many members at Corinth. They exalted themselves (largely at Paul's expense) and led the members away from Christ and trust in him. They also charged heavily for their services. When Paul was at Corinth, he refused to accept payment from the believers there. Instead he worked part time as a sail maker and received additional funding from other churches he'd planted earlier – part of their mission budget. He didn't want the cost of preaching the Gospel to be an obstacle to the Corinthians. He didn't want them to think he was only preaching Jesus to receive a paycheck. But that's exactly what the super-apostles were in it for. And the Corinthians were only too glad to pay – and why not? What they thought they were getting was so much better than what Paul gave them.

It grieved Paul sorely to see people whom he knew so well and loved so dearly taken in by these false guides and spiritual hucksters. It pained him to know that they were being led away from Christ, that they were being burdened with the law, and being mooched off of by religious parasites. And so, in the chapters leading up to today's text, Paul has been defending his authority as a true apostle of Jesus Christ over and against these self-appointed and self-designated super-apostles. And as part of this defense at one point Paul says, "So, you're impressed with the endless boasting of the super-apostles, about how they're so much better

than me. Okay, just for argument's sake, let me play their game. Though it's an exercise in being childish, I'll do a little boasting. And we'll see who wins."

He then proceeds to blow the competition away. "I was called personally by Christ. He appeared to me and appointed me to be his apostle to the Gentiles. We're they? No. I've planted dozens of churches all over the Roman world. How many have they planted? None. In the process I've suffered mightily, I've been imprisoned, beaten, stoned, shipwrecked; I've suffered robbery, exposure to the elements, lack of food and water; I've faced more perils than I can name. What have they suffered to reach the lost for Christ? Nothing. They only show up when the work is done, all is safe, the coast is clear, and supper's on the table."

It's this line of thought that Paul is continuing in today's Epistle reading. When he says, "I must go on boasting" he means, "I've got plenty more I can say." But when he says, "though there is nothing to be gained by it", he means, "this is really silly that I should have to do this to prove myself to you." But he does go on. He goes on to visions and revelations of the Lord of which we know Paul had several. That is to say on a number of occasions, the risen Lord Jesus appeared to Paul and spoke to him. Paul also indicates that he was taught the Gospel by Jesus by means of direct revelation – though we don't know a great deal about that precisely because Paul wasn't a guy who liked to boast.

Paul then mentions a man he knows in Christ who was taken up for a brief tour of Paradise. He's uncertain whether it was merely a spiritual experience or if the guy was taken up bodily; but what the man saw there defies description. Human words cannot express the glorious wonders he beheld, nor was he allowed to try. Two things I need to say about this: first that this completely torpedoed all those books being sold in which someone claims to have gone to heaven and come back to tell what they saw there. If it really happened, they wouldn't be able to tell nor would they be permitted to. If you want to know that heaven's for real, read the Bible. If you want to know what it's like, trust in Christ and eventually you'll find out.

Second, most Bible scholars believe that when Paul says he knows this guy, he's actually referring to himself in an elliptical sort of way. It's like even while supposedly boasting about himself he's too modest to say this outright. This fits with what follows because what Paul says is essentially this: "In a boasting contest with your beloved super-apostles, I have them beat hands down. But there's no place for boasting about me in the Church of Jesus Christ. I don't want you to look at or admire me. I want you to look at Jesus. I want you to hear my words about him.

Paul goes on to explain how it is that the Lord Jesus intervened to keep him humble. A person like Paul who had done so much for the church, who understood as much as he did, who had such great revelations might very well be inclined to get a big head about it. "God chose me for all this because I'm such a great guy!" That isn't the way it works. It all depends on God's grace. Paul explains, "So, to keep me from becoming elated [with myself] by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh ... Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'."

We don't know what Paul's thorn in the flesh was. It was obviously a physical ailment of some kind that caused him pain and distress. At first he hated it. He prayed to be relieved of it. But the Lord told him no. You need this. This is for your good. It keeps you looking to me and relying on my grace and strength. Without it you would start relying on yourself and stop looking to me. This was a new revelation for Paul. And when he understood it, he embraced his thorn

in the flesh. He saw it as an indication of Christ's steadfast love. And he said, "That's the only thing I've got that's worth boasting about."

Last week when we met, we saw how the Lord sometimes brings corrective discipline into our lives. That is, to a certain degree he allows us to suffer temporal consequences as a result of our sins. In other words, he spans us when we're naughty in order to bring us to repentance and trust in Christ for forgiveness. But not all the afflictions we suffer come as the Lord's response to our sin. Some, like the one Paul is describing, come from the Lord to keep us from falling in the first place. The Lord needs to remind us who we are: weak, dependent creatures, chosen to be his children not because of any merit or worthiness in ourselves; but wholly by his grace and his saving work for us in Christ Jesus.

And to help us in this regard he sometimes sends us thorns; perhaps in the flesh, that is, bodily suffering of some kind or maybe something else, some other kind of difficulty or hardship. He does it for our good. He does it to keep us from boasting about ourselves. He does it to keep us weak so that our faith in Christ will remain strong.

That's what's worth boasting about: a Father in heaven who in love sent his Son to die for us, a Saviour who made himself weak and helpless to bear our sin, who suffered, died, and rose again; a Holy Spirit who works in us the faith that trusts in and receives this great salvation. It all depends on the grace of God and what he does for those who cannot do for themselves. Therefore let anyone of us who wants to boast, boast in the Lord. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!