

“A Reason to Boast”

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1Corinthians 1:18-31

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

19 For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.

22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

25 For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

26 Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.

27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;

28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29 so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

30 He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 in order that, as it is written,

“Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

BOASTING

What do you boast about?

I boast about my grandchildren.

They are, of course, the most beautiful, handsome and intelligent children in the world. And I am more than ready to show off recent pictures of little ones to anyone who might happen by.

Some of you know what I mean because your children and grandchildren are also the best and the brightest.

What was it Garrison Keillor used to say about his home town of Lake Wobegon? He described it as the place where all the children were above average!

We can be forgiven for boasting about our children and grandchildren and hometown.

After all, they're our family. They're our people.

But, like Garrison we need to do it with our tongue firmly planted in our cheek ...

Because boasting can be very destructive.

One reason that famous people often get into trouble is that they “believe their own press.”

They believe the overly rosy picture of their lives that is printed in the celebrity magazines when things are going well, and then they begin to act like they can do no wrong.

Of course, when that happens, those same magazines will skewer them when they make some really bad mistakes. Pride does indeed come before a fall.

But, boasting is not limited to movies stars and proud grandparents.

We have seen in Paul's letter to the Corinthians that boasting can also be a really big problem in the church.

What do we boast about in the church?

Well, almost everything.

We can boast about having the best theology.

We can boast about having the most eloquent preacher.

(Come to think of it, that one's no so bad ... don't worry about that one too much!)

We can boast about having the smartest congregation.

We can boast about having the most well connected congregation.

We can boast about having the most liberal (or the most conservative) congregation.

We can boast about having the largest congregation.

We can boast about having the congregation with the most money.

But, boasting doesn't make a church better because it runs counter to the basic mission of the church.

The church is not about us and what we can do.

The church is about God and what God has already done for us.

REMEMBER YOUR CALL

The boastful pride of the Corinthians church caused division and much personal pain.

How could Paul help them to look at things another way?

He asks them to remember what they were like before they were called to be disciples of Jesus Christ?

He wrote,

“Not many of you were smart.
Not many of you were powerful.
Not many of you were of noble birth.”

In other words, when they were called to be Christians, they didn't have a reason to brag.

They were, by and large, weak and unimportant ... at least as the world saw it.

But, God called them.

God chose them out of all the people in Corinth to be his disciples.

Why?

Not because they were the best and the brightest.

God chose them because they were weak.

They were to be examples for the rest of the world.

If God can save these people, he can save anybody!

I often thought that Paul was being a bit sarcastic in this section of the letter.

But, over the years I have come to see that Paul was making an important point about spiritual readiness.

Think about a time in your life when you made some significant spiritual commitment.

Maybe it was when you became a Christian.

Maybe it was a time when your prayer life deepened and came alive.

What were the circumstances in your life when you answered the call of God?

When I look back on my own life, the times of significant spiritual growth came when I was weak.

Often in times of struggle and failure that I saw most clearly my need for God's grace.

Paul is telling the Corinthians:

"Don't view your Christian faith not through the lens of strength and success.

View your Christian faith through the lens of weakness and struggle."

NO POWER IN POSITIVE THINKING

This runs counter to the emphasis of many famous preachers today.

What do they say?

God wants you to be rich.

God wants you to be successful.

It's all a variation of the power of positive thinking.

But, this theology is not an invention of the modern era.

This was exactly what the Corinthians preached.

They were very positive about their theologians and their preachers and their congregation.

But, did their positive self-talk did not result in positive results? Not so much.

This congregation was filled with dissension and immoral behavior.

Because they did not appreciate the depth of their sin, they could not understand and accept their need for God's amazing grace.

In order to receive forgiveness, you need to know that you are a sinner. If we believe in God's grace, we can dare to look in the mirror and admit who we really are.

Some might say that all this talk about sin is too negative.

Paul suggests it's just telling the truth.

We all need to go back to the beginning and remember who we were when God in Christ called us.

We didn't come in strength.
We came in weakness.
As the old hymn put it,
"Just as I am without one plea."

One way to get back to the beginning of our faith ... that time when as the hymn puts it ... that amazing gracious was very precious ... is to try and analyze why we tend to be boastful.

Why do we boast about things?
I would suggest that often we boast about things because we are insecure.

What Paul told the Corinthians is also true about us.
We have failed more times than we have succeeded.
We are weak and afraid.

And so we try to hide our weakness with boasting.

But, we're only fooling ourselves.
Our lack of humility not only presents a bad witness to the rest of the world, it also separates us from the grace of God.

We need to remember our call.
For many of us, the call of Christ did not come when we were strong and had it together.
It was a time when many of us felt weak and despised.

But, God used that dark time to show us the light of His glory.

When we fell and couldn't get up, God reached down and lifted us up.

A FOOLISH MESSAGE

We live in a world that tells us it's smart to brag about and protect what we have at all costs.

On the other hand, we belong to a faith that tells us true wisdom comes when we put aside boasting and remember that we are weak.

How can this be?
This seems foolish.
This seems crazy.

How can embracing weakness lead strength?
How can embracing failure lead to salvation?

This is not how the modern world thinks.
We Christians are really different.
Some would even say that we're strange.

In this regard, nothing has really changed since Paul first wrote this letter to the Corinthians long ago. Paul said that the message of the cross was "foolishness to those that were perishing."

But, to those who were "being saved" that message was the "power of God."

In last week's children sermon I had them try and find all the crosses in the church.

We found quite a few.
The cross is the most important symbol of our faith.

I told them that the cross is a symbol of God's love.
And it is.

But, the cross did not begin as a symbol of faith.
In the ancient world the cross was a symbol of death and destruction.

Someone once said to me,
"Wearing a cross around our neck is like wearing little electric chairs around our neck.
It makes no sense to venerate an object that was meant to invoke fear and punishment."

Paul understood this.
He wrote that the crucifixion of Christ was a "stumbling block" to the Jews and "foolishness" to the Greeks.

To the religious and to the reasoned, the cross made no sense.
It didn't fit in with their idea of how the world works.

That's still true.
The cross is still a stumbling block to the world.

THE AXIS MUNDI

So what do we place our faith today?
What is the one central idea or event or place that brings everything together?
Where do heaven and earth come together?

In the study of world religion there is a phrase used to describe this, the axis mundi.
That phrase means the axis of the world, the center on which the world turns.

Many religions have suggested locations for this symbolic place of destiny.
For example, in Japan. it's Mt. Fuji.
In Israel it's Mt. Zion.

In the ancient world this center of the world was a man made structure like the ziggurats.

And though this type of thinking is not so common in our country, some suggest that the big buildings that house our financial institutions serve the same function.

(That may be why the terrorists chose to attack the World Trade Center. It was a symbol of a place where the modern world met and deals were made. It was, in a certain sense, a holy place.)

An ancient philosopher once said that man is the measure of all things.
And that seems to be the wisdom of our modern world as well.

It is us and not some moral law or god who sets the boundaries of life. We are the true axis mundi, this center on which the world turns. It's all up to us.

And where has such a philosophy taken us?
Has our wisdom made us better?

In many ways the discoveries and philosophies of the modern scientific world have made things better. But, we have always managed to use those good discoveries in perverse ways.

We discover the power of the atom and use it to make a bomb.
The chemicals we use to grow bumper crops prove to cause cancer.

The marvels of social media have turned us into people who prefer virtual friends instead of real face to face contact.
And cynical politicians have used these tools to divide us and cause us to doubt our highest ideals.

In our lesson for today Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah who wrote,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

The story of the Hebrew Scriptures is the story of men and women not measuring up to the own ideals ... much less to God's ideals. The leaders of Israel put their trust in military might and political power.

But, their plans were frustrated.
Their so-called wisdom brought disaster.

And it was still happening when Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthians.
They were putting their trust in human leaders instead of God.

And that is still happening today.

Paul sarcastically attacks those who suggest that the world's wisdom can save us with a series of questions, “Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”

In other words, if we're so smart, how come the world is in such a mess?
If our wisdom is the axis mundi, the axis on which the world turns, we're in big trouble.

This idea is a very old idea by the way. The Bible tells us that it goes back to the very beginning when someone said, "Eat from that tree over there, and you'll be like God ... knowing good and evil."

This knowledge did not prove to be salvation for Adam and Eve ... just the opposite.
And, in the final analysis, wisdom has not proved to be our salvation either.

Trying to build a tower to heaven is fool's gold.
Those that worked on the Tower of Babel project can tell you all about the futility of trying to build a tower that reaches heaven.

THE CROSS AND OUR LIFE TOGETHER

Paul tells us that the axis mundi, the fixed point at the center of the world is Mt. Calvary.
And more specifically, it is the cross and the one who died there for the sins of the world.

In this seemingly weak, foolish moment, God brought us what we really need, forgiveness.

When Jesus said on the cross,
"Father, forgive them."
The world stood still and changed forever.

Our faith is based not just on believing certain things.
Our faith is based upon an event.

The turning point of history, the axis mundi, the point when heaven touched earth was when Christ died for our sins on the cross.

This is the essence of Christianity.
And this undeserved forgiveness provides the foundation for our life together.

Paul told the Corinthians that God is "the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption ..."

It is not about us and what we can do.
It's about God and what God has already done for us in Christ Jesus.

CROSSING THE FINISH LINE

The Olympics are filled with stories of triumph and tragedy. Most of the time there is a clear distinction between the two.

But, one year the distinction was not so clear in the 400-meter race.

At the start of the race Englishman, Derek Redmond popped his right hamstring.

Most runners would merely quit when experiencing an excruciating injury such as this. But, Derek wanted to compete in the race so much that he got up and started hopping toward the finish line.

All the other runners had finished the race in seconds, but Redmond in tears slowly and laboriously kept hopping. It looked as if he would fall at any moment.

Suddenly a man appeared beside Derek. His father had run down from the stands and pushed his way through the security guards to reach his son.

Redmond's father put his arm around his son and let him cry on his shoulder for a second. Then with his father holding him up, Derek hobbled to the finish line and finished the race.

I think that what happened that day could be seen as a kind of parable of how the cross brings us salvation. We do not cross the finish line because of our wisdom or good works or abilities.

We are too weak and broken to make it across the finish line on our own.

But, we are saved, we finish the race because we have a heavenly Father who, through his son Jesus was willing to come down out of the stands and carry us over the finish line.

Remember your call.

You do have a reason to boast
... not in who you are
... but in what God has done for you in Christ Jesus.

Amen.