

## ***Bragging Rights***

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: Everyone hates a braggart. Not one of us likes hearing a person going on and on talking endlessly about themselves and what they've accomplished. Or that person who, no matter what you say about something you did, they did the same thing better, grander, and with far more panache than you could ever muster. You know about which I speak. Yes?

That's funny, because at the same time, each and everyone one of us has certain things that we are proud of: individual attributes, qualities, virtues, or achievements for which we feel we have earned bragging rights. I mean, this is why scouts earn patches, soldiers earn medals, athletes earn trophies, scholars earn degrees, regular folks earn ribbons at county fairs, and millionaires try to turn their millions into billions. We're looking for recognition. We want people to look up to us and to admire our accomplishments in some field of endeavor—*any* field of endeavor. I'm sure you've seen the *Guinness Book of World Records*. What strikes me about it is how many entries are completely ridiculous. Somebody somewhere thought up some stupid, meaningless stunt that they repeated mindlessly over and over again so that they could say they did whatever it was the most times in a certain amount of time. And for it they got their name in the book. "Look at me. Ain't I wonderful?"

Do you know the biggest reason none of us likes to hear the boasting of a braggart? It's because they talk about *themselves*. We'd much prefer they talk about *us*. Or at least shut their running yap so that we can do it. We are all braggarts at heart even if for the sake of politeness we know enough not to show it. Inside we are still measuring and comparing – and usually coming out on top.

This was a huge problem in the Christian Church at Corinth. It was, as I've mentioned before, St. Paul's perpetual problem child among the many congregations he planted during his missionary journeys throughout Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece. The book of the Bible we call First Corinthians is Paul's initial stab at addressing and attempting to fix the congregation's many problems. And today's reading comes from the first chapter where the apostle is tackling the biggest issue first. That issue was that the congregation was deeply divided into competing factions. Each group was claiming bragging rights over the others. They were claiming to be superior in one or more ways to the other groups.

For example, in the section that leads up to today's text, the claim is that we're better than you because of which teacher we follow. Some said they followed Paul. Others said they followed Apollos, who was the pastor that served the church after Paul left. Others said they were followers of Peter, who apparently had stopped by for a visit. Still others, the purists, claimed to follow only Jesus. In response, Paul tells them that's just dumb. The Christian faith is the Christian faith. It doesn't matter who your teacher is. We're all saying the same thing. We're all pointing you to Jesus Christ who is alone your Savior. He's the one who died for your sins. It's through him that you have forgiveness, life, and salvation.

In today's text he moves on to two other claims to fame the groups were boasting about. The first is wisdom. "Our group is wiser than the others." The second is the display of spiritual gifts. The claim is "We've got more of Holy Spirit than you as evidenced by the signs and wonders we are performing."

Taking the second claim first because Paul really gets to it in later chapters, his response is summed up by saying, “If the Holy Spirit has indeed given you a gift, then it is for you to use in the service of the church. It’s not for making yourself look good and feel superior to others.” Paul also indicates that a lot of what certain people were saying were gifts of the Spirit were in fact phony: people were claiming to have direct prophecies from God or the ability to speak in languages they’d never learned. This was not true in the vast majority of cases. They were only acting, again, so they could claim to be superior.

More thoroughly addressed in today’s text is the claim to higher wisdom. This was the classic pursuit of the Greek culture in which Corinth sat in the center. Aristotle, Socrates, Plato, many others considered to be the finest minds of the ancient world, these were names bantered about frequently in every household. The people of Corinth knew the philosophers and their philosophies like the backs of their hands. And they were forever arguing with each other about which was better. In this culture that valued wisdom above all things, each person’s goal was to find the best and highest philosophy, the worldly wisdom that was superior to all others – either by finding the right philosopher who taught it or by synthesizing your own philosophy by cherry-picking the best ideas from those available. This being the cultural mindset, it’s easy for us to understand (but not excuse) the members of the Corinthian congregation from importing this mode of thinking into the church.

Paul’s point is that you can’t do it. The Gospel of Jesus Christ, which Paul calls the message of the cross, is not simply another worldly philosophy. It’s the wisdom of Almighty God. As such it stands opposed to every form of worldly wisdom. The goal of worldly wisdom is to make yourself better. How can I be a better human being? How should I define greatness, and how can I achieve it? What steps must I take?

The message of the cross is the opposite of that. It says that you are a sinner in rebellion against the Lord. There is nothing you can do to make yourself better. There are no steps for you to achieve greatness. Try as hard as you can, you’ll still end up in hell. You lose. No, what you need is a Savior. And not just any Savior, you need the Son of God come down from heaven and joined to human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ born of the Virgin Mary. You need him to live for you the perfect life free of sin. You need him to die for you in the most horrible and agonizing way imaginable as a sacrifice of atonement. And you need him to rise again from the dead to declare that for his sake – because of what he suffered for you – your sins against God are forgiven.

In the wisdom of the world, this message of the cross is pure absurdity. It’s foolish beyond measure. Based on human reason alone, no person could possibly believe it. And that, in part, is why God chose it as the means to save those who he gives the gift to believe it. Paul asks, “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through [its] wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.”

What did the Greeks for all their wisdom and philosophy produce? They produced a pantheon of false gods and goddesses who supposedly rewarded those who did favors for them. They produced gods who needed humans to serve and provide for them. Worldly wisdom doesn’t lead to the true God: the true God who made humans so that he could in love serve and provide for them– even to the point of dying for their sins.

This is “a stumbling block to Jews” who want to earn their own righteousness before God by obeying the Law (which they can’t do), “and foolishness to Greeks” who have their own futile

schemes for self improvement, “but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

Paul goes on to explain that this Gospel of salvation through faith in Christ robs humans of every ground about which they might possibly boast in themselves. You didn’t come to saving faith in Jesus because you were better, smarter, wiser, more educated, or in any way superior to anyone else. You came to believe in Christ because you heard this message which is foolishness to the ears of the world and God by the calling and power of his Holy Spirit gave you the grace to receive it. He left you without anything to boast about in yourself. You want to boast about something? Boast about what a great and merciful God you’ve got. Boast about what he did to save you. “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

The upshot, of course, is that factional infighting going on in the Corinthian church about which group has the higher wisdom makes no sense whatsoever. We’ve all got the same wisdom. His name is Jesus. He is the wisdom of God, and there is no greater wisdom. It goes without saying (though I will say it anyway) that the same is true for us in this congregation – and not just about wisdom. Because we are by our sinful nature born braggarts, we all lean toward wanting to do comparisons. We incline toward thinking, “I’m a better Christian than the next guy because I do more, give more, study more, pray more, care more, attend more often, pay more attention, sin less, and yes, sometimes we hear it: I am more humble. Wait. And you’re aware of that, are you? You’re proud of your humility?

All such comparisons and feelings of superiority are the fruit of the sinful nature in you, which means when you find yourself doing it, you should repent and receive God’s forgiveness. Boast in him, not yourself. He is the only bragging right you have.

A second upshot of all this has to do with how we deal with unbelievers – and in particular those who are hostile to the Gospel or think that we are fools for believing it. In a sense, they are right. In their eyes, what we believe about Jesus and what he’s done to save us is foolishness. So is the notion that God works the gift of rebirth through Holy Baptism, or that Jesus gives us his body and blood in Holy Communion. And we are not going to convince them otherwise through arguments based on human reason – as I see many trying to do in books, on Christian radio, and in the comment sections of many of the blog sites I read. I expect every one of you has friends, relatives, neighbors or coworkers whom you would like to see come to saving faith in Christ. Maybe you’ve tried to persuade them of the truth of the Gospel through the use of reason. Don’t. Simply proclaim the message of the cross. Tell them of their sin and their need for a Savior. Tell them what Jesus did for them. If and when they come to faith, it will be God’s doing, not yours. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God. All the bragging rights belong to him. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***