

"Good Boasting"

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

March 8, 2015

Third Sunday in Lent

I want to tell you all a story about a world that many of you young whippersnappers (anyone under the age of 50) may not have known ever existed. There was a time in baseball when, after hitting a homerun, the player simply put his head down, jogged around the bases at a moderate speed, shook hands with the man on deck and sat down. In football, there was a time when, after scoring a touchdown, the player simply handed the ball to the referee and ran off the field. To do anything more would have drawn a flag. There was a time in basketball when a player going to the rim with the ball would simply do a lay up. Dunking the ball in any way would bring a technical foul.

My, how things have changed. Now, many baseball players, after hitting a long drive, will stand there and watch it go before moving around the bases as slow as possible, and then high fiving everyone on the team before finally sitting down. Many football players have choreographed dance routines all ready to perform after scoring a touchdown. Basketball players at all levels delight in dunking basketballs in the hardest and most creative ways. A lay up is now a disappointment.

Lest you think I'm telling you this simply because I'm an "old school" crotchety old man (which, in many ways I am), there is a point to be made here. And the point is not just that sports have changed (which they have), but that society has changed as well. The modern day sports behavior which I mentioned before used to be viewed negatively. It was boorish, self-promoting behavior and poor sportsmanship which was to be criticized and rejected. Now, it's viewed positively as behavior which is to be accepted and emulated.

We like to think highly of ourselves and are encouraged to do so. Children, as they grow up, are being told again and again how wonderful they are before apart from any wonderful behavior or accomplishments. Professional athletes seem more interested in "building their brand" (i.e promoting themselves) than winning and they often do that before they have won anything. Regular people like

you and me can “build our brand” on the internet by getting people to “like us” on Facebook, follow us on Twitter, or respect and/or fear us in the often anonymous response areas on websites and blogs. Surely such pride and boasting would never show themselves in the Church among Christians or would they?

I’ve heard people – even Lutheran people – take pride in having made a decision for Christ. Others have talked glowingly about how many people they have led to Christ. If we don’t talk pride in those things, we may be proud of our attendance record at worship and how we are here every Sunday. Some of us even come on Wednesday, too. We may not give voice to this pride or vocally boast, but I’m sure many of us have thought about how good we are when we compare ourselves to members who never come or are less active than ourselves. We may also take pride in how big our building is, how many people are in the pews, and how much money is in the church’s bank account. Pastors are especially good at being prideful in this way. Such things are often the topics for discussion when pastors get together.

None of this is new stuff. Pride and boasting have always been a problem for sinful humanity. It was a problem for the church in Corinth to whom Paul originally wrote our epistle lesson for today. The church existed in a very metropolitan city in which wisdom, power, and social standing defined a person. The arrogance and boasting which these characteristics brought forth in people not only caused conflict among the members, but they were causing conflict between people and God. The people thought that it was by virtue of their own efforts – their wisdom, their power, and their social standing – that they had a right standing with God.

But none of those things worked for them. None of them work for us. Whatever it is you take pride in; whatever it is that you think you are good at; whatever it is you like to boast about, either silently or vocally – your intelligence, your piety, the outward trappings of your faith, and so on – do not establish your standing before God or strengthen it. You see, God does not work with wisdom,

but with foolishness. He does not work with power, but with weakness. He is not interested in the high and mighty, but with the lowly and despised.

When God set forth to save sinful humanity, it would have made sense for Him to use something that was sensible and logical to accomplish it. A sensible plan would have been for God to bring the kingdom of God about by force. Jesus could have established an earthly kingdom, driven out the foes of God's people, and attracted a great number of people as members of such a kingdom. We would have understood that because, in every other circumstance in which we need to be saved, that's how it's done – through strength or force.

However, if God was going to establish a purely spiritual kingdom, then a logical plan would have been to save those people who were faithful enough or moral enough to be accepted by God. We would have understood that, too, because, in every other situation in life where something good is offered, it is received on the basis of the merit of the ones to whom it is offered. You get good grades in school because you studied harder than the other students. You get a pay raise because you worked harder than the other employees. You win the big game because you and the team are more skilled than the other team.

But God did not choose to save us by what seems powerful to us or what seems logical or sensible to us. Instead, He chose what is weak by worldly standards and seems utterly foolish. He chose to save us by having His Son take on human flesh, taking the role of a servant, accepting the sin of the world, and undergoing the judgment against that sin and the punishment for that sin on a cross. As Paul wrote to the Philippians, “[Jesus], though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:6-8)

There's more. Not only does God's method of saving people seem weak, but God's way of distributing the fruits of that salvation – forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation – seems totally illogical

and makes no sense. God doesn't offer these wonderful gifts just to the strong, smart, and popular people of this life who already seem to get all the good things anyway. He also offers these gifts to the weak, the foolish and rejected people of this world and to everyone in between.

These gifts, therefore, are not received on the basis of merit, intelligence, or piety. In fact, those who depend upon any such human characteristic to receive them will often reject them. Paul writes, "The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God...For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles."

God's gifts are received by purely by faith through the simple means of preaching Christ crucified. And the faith to receive God's gifts, like the gifts themselves, is purely an act of God's grace. As the familiar Scripture goes, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this (faith) is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Eph. 2:8-9)

For those who want to vie for high standing, even before God, this can be a disappointment which upsets them because it takes all the competition out of salvation. They can no longer boast in their morality, spirituality, wisdom, or strength. They think it's a bad thing.

But this is a very good thing. If we have to depend on something in us to gain salvation, there can never be any assurance or comfort. We would never be able to know if we were good enough, pious enough, smart enough, or strong enough to save ourselves. Paul said to the Corinthians not to worry about that, "For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many of noble birth." They were just ordinary people like us.

Yet God chooses, saves, and gives His gifts to ordinary people like us. In Baptism, you passively received the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the Word of God, you have received the gift of faith and salvation. You didn't have to compete for these things. You didn't have to merit these things. You didn't have to be smart enough or strong enough to figure out these things.

Everything has been done by God. Why? Paul says, “So that no human being might boast in the presence of God.” Not only can’t you boast about your qualifications before God, you don’t have to boast. God the Father chose you out of love. God the Son earned these gifts for you by His weak and foolish death on the cross. God the Holy Spirit gave you these gifts through the Word and Sacraments.

Paul says that if you want to boast, then boast in the Lord. Don’t boast about who you are and what you have done for God. Rather, boast about who the Lord is and what He has done for you. Paul says, “[God] is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God has made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” Think of all the things there are to brag about in that statement. God has given you life and all that it entails. Christ Jesus is the true wisdom that connects you to God and to your eternal salvation.

Christ is our righteousness. In ourselves, we are sinners, but Christ, as our righteousness, covers all our sins.

Christ is our sanctification – our holiness – by which we are able to live holy lives as His holy people in this life and by which we are able to stand before God as holy in the judgment on the Last Day.

Christ is our redemption. By the perfect sacrifice of His holy precious blood, the price has been paid to free us from sin, free us from death, and free us from hell so that we are declared holy, will be raised from our graves, and enjoy eternity in the presence of the Lord and His people.

None of this makes sense according to worldly standards of wisdom and power, but all of it is true according to God’s way of thinking. “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not to bring to nothing things that are.”

So do not look to yourself, but Christ. Do not compete to receive the gifts of God on the basis of your merit, but receive the gifts of God on the basis of Christ’s merit. Do not boast about yourself

and what you've done, but boast in the Lord and what He has done for you, in you, and through you.

That is good boasting. Amen