

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for March 27, 2011
Lessons: Jeremiah 9:23-24, Psalm 34:1-5 and Romans 5:1-11

BRAGGING RIGHTS

Paul begins this segment of his Letter to the Romans with strong encouragement for living with hope. What could we possibly need more in these days of frustration and constriction of life than cause for hope? Paul assures us that because God sent Jesus Christ to rescue rather than judge and condemn us, our trust in him sets us right with God and so with life, other people, and even ourselves. Christ overcomes our alienation from God, making a new peace that can pervade all of life even more strongly than hostility now pervades our world. We are servants and stewards of that hope.

Then, all of a sudden, the apostle starts talking about boasting. Why does Paul need something to boast about? He and his life have been justified with God by the self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and Paul's own part in his justification is to put his trust in Christ rather than in any virtue or achievement of his own. If the man is at peace with God, life, other people, and himself, why does he need to boast?

As children, we were taught that bragging was bad and made a person sound weak and foolish. If you did something well, let others praise you, but don't spoil your accomplishment by praising yourself. If you won a game or contest of any kind whether academic or athletic, accept victory graciously and quietly. Accept any honor as though you truly were honored to receive it, not as though you deserved it, because even if you earned the honor, no one was obliged to recognize you for it or bother giving you their congratulations. Bragging was disgraceful and could turn a moment of pride into lasting shame.

Mark Twain wrote, "Often a hen who has merely laid an egg cackles as if she had laid an asteroid." These days, everyone with a bit of training is an expert, and only the true experts seem to realize how much they still have to learn and how many questions remain in their fields of expertise. The end zone self-celebration by the football player who has merely scored points in a game has become a metaphor for our time's pride and glory. My parents and teachers must have laid the prohibition against bragging very heavily upon my conscience because every time I see one of those end zone dances, read a résumé filled with self-proclaimed superlatives like "expert," "outstanding," and "extraordinary," see a big deal made of presenting a check to some worthy cause, or hear presbyters talking about the

“exemplary lives” that must be led by ordained people, I feel embarrassed for the person boasting and showing off achievement, virtue, or charity. With regard to Christian faith, if indeed as we profess we have no hope or salvation except by the grace of God – that is, by love we have not earned and cannot and by mercy we have not deserved and cannot – then what room is left for boasting? Who goes around bragging about having received what was not earned or deserved?

Yet, Paul writes repeatedly of boasting and of needing to have something to boast about. I admit that I have struggled with these boasting passages in Paul’s letters because for me they trigger the same embarrassment as the touchdown dance or the overstated résumé. After all, Jesus tells us that when we have done all we can, we should say to ourselves that we are unworthy servants who have done no more than carried out our responsibility as well as we could. But then I hear something else that demands my attention and forces me to rethink the lessons of my childhood. I hear the struggles of people who have been put down and made to feel as though they and their best efforts were never worthy of regard let alone praise. I re-read the declaration by my unofficial teacher Donald Nathanson that I put into this week’s bulletin for us to ponder. He writes in his book, *Shame and Pride*, “I know of few emotional experiences more toxic than to feel completely deserving of rejection.” Suddenly I know that there is far more to Paul’s concern with taking pride in something than a winning team’s so-called bragging rights.

It may be enough for an animal to feel good – that is, to feel pleasure – but we human beings have the capacity to doubt ourselves, and so we need to be enabled to feel good about ourselves, about being who we are, and it seems we have no other need so very hard to satisfy. The envy of others will not satisfy this need because we know that envy never comes alone but brings with it resentment and scorn. Praise will not satisfy this need because praise is momentary and sometimes insincere; besides, a even a job very well done is not me but merely something outside me I have produced, and I know where the flaws are, anyway. And if I don’t, someone will probably tell me. Our pride realizes that yesterday’s job well done is yesterday. If only it were so easy to put yesterday’s failure behind us! Pride seems to be for the moment, while shame comes guaranteed for life.

Paul says he boasts in the hope of sharing God’s glory and in the sufferings inflicted upon him because he persists in proclaiming the gospel. Paul can know he has been faithful because he hurts in so many places. We need to be careful here because Paul is an apostle not a psychologist, and neither prophets nor apostles make good examples of well integrated personalities. He is not concerned with his own wellness but only with the spiritual well-being of his churches and all who put their trust in Jesus Christ and so in the love and mercy of God. Paul feels good, so to speak, about his sufferings because Christ has called him to be an apostle to the Gentiles, and such a calling means he will be made to suffer, even as he

formerly made others suffer for their faith in Christ. He's not proclaiming the virtue of suffering but accepting his pain as a sign of the hope he has in Christ.

How can we feel right about ourselves without becoming braggarts and fools? Can we do it without putting other people down? Can I feel good about myself without needing to think I'm better than somebody else? Can I win in life without defeating someone? Can the grace of God somehow integrate my failures, shortcomings, mistakes, sins, and embarrassments into the hope and peace with God Jesus Christ gives me? Can Christ's grace also integrate my successes, achievements, and points of pride into peace with God, with other people, and with myself?

Paul answers, *Yes*, but his life is not yours or mine. The question of justified pride is important because it leads us to our own humanity. There is a pride that is the opposite of humility, and that kind of pride is arrogance and foolishness because it is really no more than shame parading its own overstated glory. That pride is the emperor in the fairy tale strutting through the town in his fine new clothes not realizing he is naked. True humility is not a matter of feeling bad about myself, ashamed of being me, but just a matter of being honestly human before God, with other people, and in front of life's many mirrors. So, we Christians need to hear from Paul, Jeremiah and each other that there is another kind of pride which is the opposite, not of humility, but of shame. By the grace of God, we need to be able to feel good about being who we are. We need to be enabled to handle with faith our points of pride and matters of shame, without exaggerating either. Faith can equip us to deny both pride and shame power over us and control of our lives.

We do not deserve God's love or need to. Our Presbyterian tradition, however, took our undeserving too far. Faith is not self-contempt. Paul's message is reconciliation and peace. We can stop proving ourselves worthy and let ourselves be loved. Then we can enjoy our achievements without exaggerating them or comparing ourselves with others, and we can feel the sting of our failures without becoming losers in our own eyes. That's freedom – freedom from pride and freedom from shame. It's not that we no longer feel either pride or shame; they are natural, and we will continue to feel them, but no longer will either become who we are.

There is something more, also. I call it redemption of our past. The hope God gives us in Christ can turn our past failures into preparations for a better future filled with life. God uses our successes and failures both to prepare us for ministry and service in a world that needs understanding and compassion to be healed and redeemed. By the grace of God, all of our life experiences – the good, the bad, and the painful – are gathered up to be used for hope, and, as Paul says from his own experiences of undue pride and bitter shame, "hope does not disappoint us." Amen.