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Bragging Rights

(1 Corinthians 1:18-31 NRSV) 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."

"Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." What do **you** boast in? Oh, I know you try not to do so publicly because it is unseemly to boast about on oneself, isn't it? It's not polite to call attention to yourself. In Hawaii, I learned that the Japanese have a saying for that: "the nail that sticks out gets hammered down." Where I grew up, in Texas, there was a much less poetic way of saying this: "Son, you're gettin' way to big for yer britches. Don't go braggin' on yourself." (This is odd, though, in a state where in order to graduate high school you were required to learn the state song with its lines like "Texas our Texas.... Proudest and grandest.... Empire-wide and glorious.... You stand supremely blest." Nobody's mamma apparently told the song writer or the state legislature that it was unseemly to go braggin' on yourself.)

Pride and humility are curious things. Dan Rather tells the story of how, after he became the anchorman for the CBS evening news, he was visiting a town where he'd lived a long time before. The town was where one of his television jobs had been, and while he was visiting a man stopped him on the street and said "Excuse me, didn't you use to do the news here?" As Rather reached for his pen, because he just knew the man was going to want his autograph, he replied proudly and self-importantly, "Yes, I'm Dan Rather and I used to be on the news here a long time ago." The man stared at him for several seconds and said, "Hey, whatever happened to you?"

Pride and reticence, boasting and bashfulness, are things that get all mixed up in our culture and which are the subject of all kinds of very mixed messages. It often seems that both in life and in business, it is the skillful self-promoter who is the one gets ahead, rather than the one who is reticent and hangs back and waits for others to notice him. The person has no ambition ends up being an uninteresting person who is often dissatisfied with her life, but too much ambition often marks a person as stuck up and aloof.

But a way of cutting to the chase in all of this is, I think, indeed to ask: What **do you** boast in? Human imperfection being what it is, I know that every one of us has **something**. We may be well-mannered enough to keep our secret little point of pride well-hidden. Or maybe it's something that only our spouse knows, but, then, we know some of the secret things he or she takes secret pride in so we figure there's a mutual standoff and other folks won't end up knowing those less-than-attractive things that we mentally brag to ourselves about, mentally feel superior about, think we're better than others about.

What do *you* boast in? What do *you* brag about? Preacher Fred Craddock tells the story of some missionary friends who were put under house arrest many years ago in China and then suddenly told that they were being returned to America. There was

just one catch;

The soldiers said, "You can take 200 pounds with you." They had been there for years! Two hundred pounds! They got the scales and they started the family arguments-two children, wife, and husband. Must have this vase...Well, this is a new typewriter...What about my books?...What about our toys? They weighed everything and took it off, weighed it and took it off, until at last they had it right on the dot: two hundred pounds. The soldiers asked if they were ready to go and they said, "Yes." "Did you weigh everything?" They said, "Yes!" "Did you weigh the [children]?" "No," we did not. "You will have to weigh the [children]." In the blink of an eye, typewriter, vase, books, all became trash.¹

Bragging rights to having gotten the most pounds in the pile became as nothing in the face of what is truly, truly important, truly worth boasting about.

And that's exactly what Paul is trying to get at in these verses today written to his favorite problem-child, fractious, fighting church. He's trying to get them to stop boasting and gloating, bragging and swaggering – some of them being oh-so-proud of being Greek and so therefore, they boast, smarter than the others, versus some of them being Jewish and boasting about how *they* are really the more "spiritual" ones in the church. But Paul, as he has had to do more than once with this challenging church, says, in essence, "Stop it. Both of you. Right now. A plague on both your houses." And then he goes on to say what it is that a Christian should be truly boastful of, truly proud of; if you're going to brag, says Paul, brag on the power of God to confound and transcend our petty parochialisms, brag on what God has done, not on what you have done, or on what you believe, or your own piety, or your own sense of superiority. And

¹Told by Rev. Thomas L. Butts http://day1.org/583-things_that_change_and_things_that_dont.
Note: all quotations in this sermon at from this source.

what is it that God has done? Well, Paul puts it simply, but, I must say, in words that have been oversimplified, misinterpreted, and abused. He says, simply, “We preach Christ crucified.” And then he says that such a proclamation reflects God’s way of hauling us up short; he says that such a proclamation is in fact foolishness in the eyes of the world and yet it is precisely such foolishness that the Christian needs to believe, and it is the true source of our bragging rights!

But before we say more about what he means by that those things, we need to say what he does not mean. I said earlier that these verses have been, in my estimation, abused and even twisted at times. The first misunderstanding is this: When Paul says “We preach Christ crucified” he is not suggesting that understanding of salvation that only entered the church a thousand years later that claims that the reason that Christ came was to be a blood sacrifice for an angry God and that only such a bloody sacrifice could atone for and, as it is too often put, “pay the ransom” for human beings. To say it plainly, such a view makes God into a monster. Such a view with its preoccupation with blood and ransom and pain as somehow being required in order for us to be saved is not part of the gospel, and it was an interpretation that was not, in fact, offered until the 11th century. Moreover, it is really only in the last hundred years, that this “sacrificial ransom” view has really taken hold among some folks, especially in America, and there are too many American hymns, for example, that you can find that give this awful view that God required the killing of His own son in order to save humanity.

But that was never Paul’s view. So what *does* Paul mean when he says “we preach Christ crucified”? Well, here is what is absolutely key – Paul never talks about the Cross apart from the Resurrection; he never talks about the Resurrection without the Cross. They are always a unity for him. He may refer at times, like in today’s scripture, to one or the other, but when you read all of his writings you realize that

Cross and Resurrection can never be separated. And the cross is not the sign of **God's** angry demand for a blood ransom; no, it is the sign of **humanity's** ability to do awful things sometimes. The resurrection is the guarantee, though, that human sin and ugliness and evil will not, cannot defeat God's love. We preach "Christ crucified" because sometimes we need to honestly face the pain that human beings are capable of inflicting on one another. But we always also preach resurrection to remind ourselves that God is greater than that pain and evil.

I said there was a second thing that Paul says, and that is this point of view about God's both becoming human to know what our lives are like but nonetheless overcoming life's limitation and evil through the power of love is, in his words, "foolishness" to so many in the world. And, in essence, Paul says: *if this be foolishness then I'm in favor of foolishness! Let's be fools for Christ!* But this, too, can be terribly misunderstood. Paul is not saying that it is not important to love God with all our minds, not just our hearts and our souls. He's not saying that thinking well and hard in the company of others about important questions is not important. He's not saying that we should be content with shallow answers instead of continually trying to go as deep as possible, to walk as far as possible, with God. He is not licensing any sort of anti-intellectualism that would make the silly and sometimes tragic claim that "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you sincerely believe it." Because it does matter, it does matter. What you believe, what you believe about God, can help make your life beautiful even when it's hard, or it can help make your life a hell it did not need to be. Being a fool for Christ does not mean taking pride, as you and I have known some who do, in being shallow and being proud of it. That is an affront to the God who has made us with minds and called us to use them as well as possible.

No, what I think Paul is getting with this use of the word "foolishness" to describe

the Good News of the Gospel is to remind us of the difference between what is truly important and what is ephemeral, what is worthy of your loyalty and what is not, what finally abides and what is only temporary. And he is begging us to hold onto the first and not to chase the second, for the ephemeral and the temporary will finally disappoint and dissatisfy. A preacher by the name of Thomas Butts puts it this way:

Treasures become trash when we have to weigh everything and we can't keep it all. When value shifts, things of greater value surface. We've all had to trash things that were once of great value. We have tearfully and reluctantly taken things off the scale in some defining moment-cherished ideas and plans, crumbling relationships, pride of mind and body, financial gain. There are things tangible and intangible that have to go when life calls on us [to recur to our opening story] to "weigh your [children]."

For, "There are some seemingly important things that you cannot count on forever, and some that you can."

That is what Paul is getting at: the culture around us seeks every day to tell us what is the smart thing, the wise thing, the prudent thing. And that culture tells us in a hundred ways that our job is to get more stuff, to look out for number one, to be suspicious of those not like us, to think the worst about folks instead of presuming the best. It tell us that those are the things that will make us happy. It tells us that those are the things in which wisdom consists.

But the culture is wrong. That is what Paul is telling us and telling the Corinthians. The wisdom of the world always tends to focus on the fleeting. But the fleeting does not last. Again, hear what Pastor Butts has to say:

Religion can get complicated; theology can become confusing and doctrines can be deceptive, but here is something simple you can hold onto and understand. It is that silent force that holds the world together and ties us to the world to come.

It does not change. It is written into the constitution of creation and personified in the Lord Jesus Christ: faith in God, hope in God's eternal purposes and love for God and God's creation.

In Christ crucified and resurrected we have what the world views as foolishness but which is actually the sign and embodiment of the only thing that, indeed, will last: the unconquerable love of God.

Our faith, says Paul, is not about a twisted tale of a despot God who killed his own son to pay some sort of ransom for us without which God won't love us, our faith is not about being simple or smug or shallow or stupid. No, in the end, Paul is saying that our faith is about recognizing what is finally true, what finally lasts, what is finally important. I love the story about

the man who arrived at heaven's gate with a wheelbarrow loaded with gold bars. St. Peter said, "You can't bring that in. Everyone who comes in here must come as empty handed as when they were born." The man fell on his knees and pleaded that his request be appealed to God. And in a moment of indulgent kindness, St. Peter consulted God about the man's request to bring gold bars into heaven. God's answer was a simple question, "Why does he want to bring in paving materials?"

My friends, when life gives you those moments when **you** have to discern and decide, when **you** have to "weigh your children," when **you** are loading up your wheelbarrow with attitudes and beliefs and hopes for the journey, choose well, choose well; choose what truly lasts, is truly important, truly satisfies.