



4th Sunday after Epiphany – January 28-30, 2023

Preacher: Pastor Scott Oelhafen

Sermon Theme: **Are You Bursting with Pride?**

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 1: 26-31

26 Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28 God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, 29 so that no one may boast before him. 30 It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. 31 Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”

Dear Friends in Christ,

One of my favorite things is to send and receive Christmas cards. It's a great way to stay in touch with family and friends, especially those out of the area. While each card is meaningful (especially the ones with manger scenes), the cards that contain neatly-folded letters tend to be most treasured. I especially like reading family updates and seeing photos of the past year. These Christmas letters are usually a page long, documenting milestones, vacation destinations, and well, let's just say "some are in a class all their own." We've all received them, right? The BRAG-LETTER. And one of them goes something like this.

"My dear family and friends, as expected, I won the Pulitzer Prize for my work with the local newspaper. And to my surprise, I also earned a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize, recognizing my work with underprivileged children. Chip, our fast growing 13-year-old, was offered a basketball scholarship at the University of Minnesota, my alma mater. Of course, Chip is leaning towards the ACC because of its reputation as being the best basketball conference in the country. The pressure is really on to make a decision quickly, but Chip will have to patiently wait until 8th grade to choose between Duke and North Carolina. Not to be outdone by his brother, 10-year old Dale was offered the Benny Goodman Scholarship at the Julliard School of Music, and he's only been playing clarinet for 6 months. And if you're a careful reader, you may notice there is nothing listed above about my trophy wife, my children's perfect mother. She'll be content to be our family's unsung hero." Of course, who would EVER write a letter like that? It just leads us to believe that his family is perfect and ours is not, and maybe that's the point. I think we'd all correctly say: that's boasting. That's bragging. And, nobody likes a braggart.

Some boasting is a sin when it is rooted in false pride, desiring to put ourselves and our accomplishments above everyone else. But, not all boasting is bad. Did you know that some boasting can be done with a humble spirit? Boasting can simply mean sharing your personal good news with others. Let me give a few examples that are not quite so over-the-top. When new parents or grandparents call our church office to inform us of a newborn child or grandchild, none of us in the church office have ever thought they were being inappropriate. We love hearing their good news. Or when any of us achieves something special: like be confirmed, graduate, get a different job, or complete a difficult project ... we “burst” with pride, by telling others our good news. That’s just appreciating God’s good blessings. Just a quick reminder: let’s try to err on the side of Christian love when others share their news with us, and not judge them too quickly as bragging.

In our sermon reading for today/tonight from 1 Corinthians, chapter one, the Apostle Paul reminds us that as Christian believers, we should be “bursting with pride”, not in what we have done, but in what Jesus has done for sinners like us, what He has achieved at His cross and empty tomb. THAT’S the biggest deal. Now, as Christians, we can boast about who we are and what we have through Christ alone. So let’s look for ways to share this Gospel, this good news with others at home, at work, and in our community. Not in a Christmas brag letter, but on the inspired pages of Holy Scripture, Paul commands us: ***Let the one who boasts, boast in the LORD.*** So on this last Saturday/Sunday/Monday of January, let’s ask a good question: ***Are You Bursting with Pride?*** Paul will show us first of all, anyone without Christ doesn’t have anything to boast about. And then we’ll see: everyone with Jesus has everything to boast about.

The Greek residents of Corinth were “bursting with pride” all right, for all the wrong reasons. In Greek culture, using human reason to gain earthly wisdom and knowledge was life’s highest goal, really life’s only goal. To many Greeks, the pursuit of knowledge was all part of a false religion called “Gnosticism” and the human mind had become their god. I say that because according to their man-centered philosophy if something couldn’t be understood by human reason, well, then it couldn’t possibly be true. How arrogant and how sad. No wonder the Gospel of Jesus sounded so foolish to them: God becoming man? Jesus born of a virgin? Christ rising from the dead? How could all that be possible? And this spiritually dangerous thinking was pulling Christian believers away from God’s truth. That’s why Paul pleads with them in the opening words of our sermon reading: ***26 Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise;*** He warned them: “don’t be influenced by this satanic thinking disguised as higher learning.” The fact was not many Corinthian members had much to boast about. Most weren’t rich and famous. They weren’t the movers and shakers in

their circles. They were just common, every day people. But, some were so bursting with pride over themselves, they were grabbing on to any popular philosophy of the world like “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die.” The Greek philosopher Celsus summed up the world’s view of a Christian church this way: “It’s a place for the foolish, the dishonorable, the stupid, the slaves, and the women and children to meet.” I don’t know of any people who call themselves Gnostics today, but there are many in our world and in even New Ulm who agree with that and with a former Minnesota governor who said the “Christian church is a place for those who are weak in mind.”

Many people today are looking for a religion fits them – one they can figure out and that won’t offend anyone. But, how small a religion is that? I mean, human reason alone will never figure out how to solve the problems of sin and suffering. It will give little personal help to those hurting around us. And it offers no comfort to those facing death or who have lost loved ones. Jesus asks good questions in Matthew, chapter 16(:26): ***What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?*** Don’t be fooled. All the degrees and diplomas earned at a university offer little confidence when standing before a Holy and Just God on at the time of our death or Judgement Day. And we ALL will stand before him. So we ask the question, are you bursting with pride? Anyone without Jesus doesn’t have anything to boast about.

But, every one with Jesus has everything to boast about. In a way, the Greeks were right. The Christian church, our dear Christian church of St. Paul’s, is really for the weak and foolish ... a place for the weak to be spiritually strengthened and the fool to be enlightened with God’s wisdom, with all God’s promises written down in the Holy Bible. We’d agree with Paul who was perhaps the Greatest Missionary who ever lived who first humbly penned these words, when he said: ***Although I am less than the least of all the Lord’s people (Ephesians 3:8).*** And again when he said: ***Here is a trustworthy saying that deserve full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst (1 Timothy 1:15).*** Paul wasn’t using false flattery when he said these words. He was admitting that he could never find nor achieve salvation on his own. Nor can we by our own reason or strength. The good news of the Bible is that salvation doesn’t depend on how much we know, but on who we know. We know Jesus, who humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. Thanks why Paul wrote: ***30 It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.*** We are the guilty ones. Jesus is the Innocent one. Yet, he became the guilty one in our place, taking all our sins, all our arrogance, all our selfishness on himself to earn us heaven. The Son of God became what he was not ... a sinner to make us what we needed to be ... holy, and right before God. His 33-years of righteousness, or right living redeemed us, and bought us from sin, death, and hell.

On the Last Day, only those who believe: “I am the one who Jesus loves” will have anything to boast about. “I’m the one who Jesus loves.” That statement almost sounds a little like boasting, doesn’t it? But, that’s not arrogant, but simply defines who we are as Christians. It’s our identity. We’re more than just Minnesotans. We more than just residents of Brown County. We more than just Viking or Packer fans. We’re Christians.

How different life would be if we looked at ourselves the way Christ does at the beginning of our day: as totally forgiven, totally loved by Christ? Sociologists have this theory that that we become what the most important person in our lives thinks we are. So what does your spouse, parent, boss, or best friend think of you? Take that to the next level. What does Jesus think of you? He loves you, more than anyone else. Need proof? Just look at His cross. Just look at his empty tomb. And that means everything.

Stop making God’s plan of salvation so hard. God didn’t make his plan of salvation so **complicated** that it required a master’s degree to learn. God didn’t make his plan so expensive that only a few of the super-rich could afford it. God didn’t make his plan so difficult that only the super strong could achieve it. Instead, God made his plan of salvation so simple that even a child could believe it. Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.

Christmas cards may come. And Christmas cards may go. And you might give an eyeroll or two when reading some of them. But, don’t ever forget, **“Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”** Let’s be someone who tells every one what Christ has done. Amen.