
Boasting: A Weak Love of God & Our Neighbor

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The Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta, GA
5th Sunday after Pentecost (9B)
July 5, 2009

Invocation: In the name of God, our Maker, Redeemer, Defender, & Friend. Amen.

From the Collect appointed for this 5th Sunday after Pentecost, the Sunday always nearest the annual celebration of our Independence Day:

O God, you have taught us to keep all your commandments by loving you and our neighbor: Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, and united to one another with pure affection . . .

That was the opening prayer we heard at the beginning of this service several minutes ago. It's found on the front of your service leaflet. Notice the reference to "loving God and our neighbor." We'll come back to it in a few moments. But first I also want to recall our epistle reading from 2nd Corinthians read earlier this morning. Whenever I hear that reading my mind flashes back to seminary days. In seminary we had a class comedian who used to do an impersonation of St. Paul. While quite funny it was not irreverent, mind you. We just enjoyed the apostle trying to remember exactly how many people he baptized in Corinth.

Today's epistle is taken from Paul's 2nd Letter to the Corinthians. But my classmate's impersonation was based on Paul's 1st Letter to the Corinthians. Now the two readings are focused on different subjects. However, they share a very similar phrase: the expression, "I do not know."

That precise expression from 1st Corinthians, "I do not know," gets repeated a couple of times in today's reading from 2nd Corinthians. And after I repeat to you my classmate's humorous reading of the first "I do not know," maybe you'll hear a comic echo in Paul's repeated "I do not know's" in today's reading. Of course""maybe I shouldn't do this to you!

You may never again be able to hear either passage with the same kind of pious seriousness that we're accustomed to with scripture! You may even blame me for it! But go ahead""I can take it. And maybe hearing scripture with a little more comic effect is not such a bad thing.

So here goes. First, the context. It's that familiar passage found at the very beginning, in the very first chapter of 1st Corinthians. Paul writes:

[Now] it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul", or "I belong to Apollos", or "I belong to Cephas", or "I belong to Christ." Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you . . .

Now here my classmate would pause, freeze the frame, then go back and repeat the apostle's claim:

I thank God that I baptized none of you . . .

"None of you," he would emphasize. And only then would he resume the reading:

. . . none of you except Crispus and Gaius . . .

And here he would "ad lib" and paraphrase a bit:

. . . Crispus and Gaius [yes . . . and, let's see . . . uh, oh yeah!] . . . I did baptize also the household of Stephanas . . .

And then he would conclude with the apostle admitting "beyond that I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.

There it is: the 1st Corinthians' version of the apostle's, "I do not know." Okay. Maybe you are, or maybe you're not, just as amused as my fellow seminarians by all this Pauline back-tracking and re-stating. But I bet the apostle himself would permit himself a little chuckle if he were here today. If he were listening beside us in one of our pews I think that little phrase, "beyond that, I do not know," would bring a smile to his face. What do you think?

Now when he says, "I do not know," in today's reading, it's likely it has less comic potential. After all, he invokes God as all-knowing immediately after. But see what you think. Maybe the humor is all in the tone, or maybe all that's needed is a little body-language like, a shrug of the shoulders. Listen again to the epistle reading for today. Paul writes:

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven "whether in the body or out of the body I do not know [shrug of the shoulders]; God knows.

And I know that such a person "whether in the body or out of the body I do not know [shrug of the shoulders]; God knows" (2 Cor. 12.2-3)

Okay; end of comic potential. And now the apostle's real point begins.

In this text most commentators infer that St. Paul is really speaking of himself when he writes, "I know a person in Christ . . ." But in his effort not to boast, it is evident, he makes a rhetorical effort to be anonymous. We will return to his effort not to boast later.

But I also wonder: what was the content of that revelation the apostle refers to when he wrote:

[such a person] was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. (2 Cor. 12.4)

Now wouldn't we all want to know what "such a person" heard in Paradise, up in "the third heaven . . . things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat?" Wouldn't you want to know that? Or would you be satisfied with an apostolic shrug of the shoulders, accompanied by that now-familiar phrase, "I don't know; God knows?"

Indeed, now that we're talking about things unrevealed, undisclosed, or veiled scriptures, how about something similar in today's gospel reading "a similar case of concealment. What was it that people heard in Jesus' hometown that day? You know, on that sabbath when"

he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. [And] They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!

Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.

[And] Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house."

And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.

And he was amazed at their unbelief. (Mark 6.2-6)

What could he have said to them that day that brought about such a contrast between his words and his deeds on the one hand, and their familiarity and intimacy with him on the other hand? In this connection note that it was not just his neighbors about whom Jesus complained. Prophets lack honor, he claimed, not just in their hometown but also "among

their own kin, and in their own house."

What could he have said that confronted not only his neighbors but even family members with the challenge of whether to embrace his wisdom or reject it; whether to "'take offense at him' and succumb to 'unbelief' or not?

Well, I'm going to make an informed guess""informed, because I'll use the clues provided in the gospel passage itself. Two clues stand out: first, it had something to do with their being his neighbors, and kinfolk, and family members""the very terms he used to describe those who were offended with him.

The second clue is that it had something to do with his being prophetic, since that too was the key term that Jesus used in highlighting their rejection and their unbelief. Something about neighbors and family, and something prophetic. Hmm, what could that be?

Now it's obvious that "'I don't know; God knows,' what Jesus said that day. But consider the following possibility based on similar things that scripture records that he said on similar occasions elsewhere.

For example, consider the very scripture appointed yesterday for the 4th of July, the gospel we read every Independence Day because it exhorts us to a love of neighbor that is also a prophetic love.

It's one of the most quoted passages from our Lord's Sermon on the Mount (a sermon that concludes like today's gospel with people being astounded at his teaching because "he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes;" Matt. 7.28). Listen then to our Independence Day gospel from Matthew chapter 5:

"'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matt. 5.43-48)

Now here, precisely here, we do well to ask what is said here that could lead one's neighbors and family members to take offense and yield to unbelief. Well, here at last we have arrived at the exact opposite of that apostolic shrug of the shoulders, "'I don't know; God knows.'

Because we do indeed know why this passage from Matthew""or any similar passage like it that we could have heard from Jesus on any average sabbath day""why such teachings are so offensive and unbelievable. We do indeed know why, the way that Mark Twain famously acknowledged when he joked, "'It ain't the parts of the Bible I don't understand that bother me; it's the parts I do understand.'

So, to apply his comic remark to today's scriptures we might say, "'It's not understanding the revelation to Paul in the third heaven of Paradise that bothers me. Rather, it's understanding that familiar wisdom of Jesus that I could hear him teach in any synagogue on any sabbath day and find in any similar text of scripture; that's what bothers me.'

Ironically, that familiar wisdom of Jesus may be just as unspeakable to us as Paul's revelation in which he "heard things that are not to be told;" unspeakable not because they can't be told but because we can't bear to hear it. As long as we hear "'talk' in general terms, up on some mountaintop, about loving your enemies or praying for those who persecute you, or benefiting those who are evil as well as the good""the righteous alongside the unrighteous or loving others besides those who love us, or caring about others besides our brothers and sisters; well (we can say), "'That's what prophets do, right? They challenge us; that's their way. Isn't it nice?'

But bring it on home to us in some direct way, and challenge us as neighbors to love specific enemies, to pray for particular people who persecute us, to benefit those whom we know are evil as well as those who are good""the righteous alongside the unrighteous; or challenge us as family members to love others besides those who love us, or care about others besides our own brothers and sisters; then we are liable like Jesus' hometown folks to take offense or fall into unbelief, yes?

Or do I hear anyone saying now: "'I don't know what you're talking about. God knows!'

What is our remedy or redemption here? What would prevent us disciples of Christ assembled here today from taking offense at Jesus' teachings, or amazing him with our unbelief?

The remedy lies ready before us in the apostolic spiritual strategy of boasting in our own shortcomings and weaknesses on the one hand, but in order to exalt the divine power working in us on the other hand. As St. Paul also says in today's epistle reading:

on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses . . .

[because the Lord] said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12.4-5, 9-10)

Now an excellent example of such boasting-in-weakness is the 12 Step group. You know: 12 Step groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, or Sex Addicts Anonymous. What you may not know is that such AA, NA, and OA meetings involve participants cavorting about their weaknesses. They cavort "even "crow" about their inability to control their addictive behaviors, and therefore their need for a program of recovery and a Higher Power who can do for them what they cannot do for themselves.

But in addition to the example of 12 Step meetings let me give you a rabbinic example. It's a story that comes to us from rabbis closer to us in time than the apostle Paul, who before his conversion was "Rabbi Saul.' It's from 18th century Eastern Europe and the Jewish mystical tradition of Hasidism that began with the renowned rabbi Baal Shem Tov [1698-1760]. Perhaps you've heard this story from his wisdom tradition. But it bears repeating here. It has also been re-told by the celebrated author and holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel in his novel, "Gates of the Forest."

The great rabbi Baal Shem-Tov loved his people. Whenever he sensed they were in danger, he would go to a secret place in the woods, light a special fire, and say a special prayer. Then, without fail, his people would be saved from danger.

Baal Shem-Tov passed on and his disciple, Magid of Mezritch, came to lead the people. Whenever he sensed his people were in danger, he would go to the secret place in the woods. "Dear God," he would say, "I don't know how to light the special fire, but I know the special prayer. Please let that be good enough." It was, and the people would once again be saved from danger.

When Magid passed on, he was succeeded by another rabbi, the Rabbi Moshe-leib of Sasov, and whenever he heard that his people were in danger, he would go to the secret place in the woods. "Dear God," he would say, "I don't know how to make the special fire, I don't know how to say the special prayer, but I know this secret place in the woods. Please let that be good enough." It was, and the people would once again be saved from danger.

When Rabbi Moshe passed, he was succeeded by Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn, and whenever somebody told him that his people were in danger, he didn't even get out of his armchair. He could only bow his head and shrug his shoulders. "Dear God," he would pray, "I don't know how to make the special fire. I don't know how to say the special prayer. I don't even know the secret place in the woods. All I know is the story, and I'm hoping that's good enough." It was, and his people would be saved. www.story-lovers.com/listsrabbistories.html

Isn't that a remarkable story of rabbinic boasting in one's weakness, and precisely in that boasting throwing oneself onto the power of God? Notice especially the comment about Rabbi Israel not even getting out of his armchair! Perhaps we should go and do likewise, Christian friends. Not necessarily by staying in our armchair, but in striving to love God and our neighbor we may also need to shrug our shoulders and confess:

"How am I going to manifest such a love in this situation and with those people and with that person in particular? I don't know; God knows. But I can tell the story . . .' Then may our experience be like the rabbis who admitted and even boasted of their shortcomings and weaknesses, but at the same time appealed to the divine power and discovered it was sufficient.

Or we may find ourselves confronting the words of our Collect appointed for today and acknowledging: "How am I going to be devoted to God with my whole heart? I don't know; God knows. But I can tell the story . . .' Then may our story will be the story of a Savior who calls us to try, and in that effort empowers us in our failings and weakness.

Or we may find ourselves in relationship to our fellow citizens or parishioners or neighbors or family members, and admitting: "'How are we as a church or a people going to be united with one another with pure affection, as the Collect also enjoins? I don't know; God knows. But I can tell the story . . .' and first and last our story will be the story of a Savior who inspires us to love beyond what we would be capable of in view of our own failings and weakness.

Or last but not least: we may find ourselves gathering together with our sisters and brothers and singing the words of the African American spiritual found in our Hymnal (676), "There is a Balm in Gilead;" singing especially that last verse:

If you cannot preach like Peter,
If you cannot pray like Paul,
You can tell the love of Jesus,
And say, "He died for all."

The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that we can 'boast' about not being able to "'preach like Peter' or "'pray like Paul'" or boast about not being able to serve the poor like Mother Teresa or be a "'drum major for justice' like Martin Luther King, Jr. And yet, at the same time we can be preaching and praying and serving and, through all that, demonstrating in our weakness the power of God take over where our own abilities fall short.

For the Lord says to us what he said to the apostle in today's epistle: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen!

NOTES

Thanks to our Canon John Mark Wiggers, I was reminded that St. Luke's version of today's gospel tells us precisely what Jesus said that outraged his townsfolk" even to the point of attempting to murder him! It is that familiar version of the story in which Jesus quotes the celebrated passage from Isaiah 61.1-3:

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "'Is not this Joseph's son?' He said to them, "'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum." '

And he said, "'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.' When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way. Luke 4.16-30

Compare today's Epistle reading where Paul says""

[The Lord] said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12.9-10)

""with what Paul says in 1st Corinthians chapter one:

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; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.' (1 Cor. 1.27-31)

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