

Better Boasting  
Matthew 5:1-10 and Corinthians 1:18-31  
February 2, 2020

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**First Reading: Matthew 5:1-10**

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

## **Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31**

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. For it is written,  
“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

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? 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. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

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. 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.”

## **Sermon 9:00 and 11:00 am**

There are 2000 years of distance between us and the Corinthians, the folks to whom Paul first wrote this passage. They had no Facebook, no Super Bowl, no Super Bowl ads, and no impeachment.

But we here in Lake Forest are even more different from the Corinthians than other people these days are.

Let me tell you what I mean: there's a sociological and demographic group called MissionInsite that tells churches about their neighborhoods, so that they can figure out what ministries might be meaningful for those who live around them.

According to MissionInsite, 75% of the people who live in Lake Forest are what they call "American Royalty." There are 73 subgroups in its schema, and American Royalty comes in right at the top of the heap in socioeconomic terms—ahead even of "Platinum Prosperity" and "Kids and Cabernet."

Here's what MissionInsite says about this group of our neighbors:

*The wealthiest segment in the nation, American Royalty consists of mainly established couples enjoying gracious lifestyles in the fashionable suburbs of large metropolitan areas...*

*It takes money to maintain this lifestyle, and American Royalty are good at both making it and managing it. They surpass all other segments in the number who invest in stocks, mutual funds, and savings bonds...*

*Their spacious suburban homes are typically located on large lots in some of the most desired neighborhoods in the nation. Most of the stately homes were built many years ago...While their homes may be their castles, American Royalty also have high rates of owning or renting vacation homes.*

American Royalty have a lot to brag about!

Now, even as I read those definitions out loud I know there are lots of exceptions to these descriptions both in Lake Forest and of course here at church. I also know that in American society there is a big taboo about drawing attention to class differences, so hearing about your neighbors...and yourselves...in such bald terms may make you wish I hadn't done it. But I'm an interim pastor, so...

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And besides, I'm not the only one drawing attention to social class. Paul also does it. And the water we swim in is quite different from the aquarium holding the Corinthians, about whom Paul says:

*Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.*

He goes on to insinuate they are “*foolish,*” “*weak,*” “*low and despised in the world.*” Certainly not American Royalty. Probably not Platinum Prosperity or Kids and Cabernet, either.

And yet, Paul tells us, God uses them to proclaim the Good News. God uses them to shame the strong and the wise. God uses them for the sake of the Gospel.

Of course, this is just what God has been doing since the beginning. Throughout the Old Testament, God shows a pattern of using surprising people to work most effectively—not the oldest, but the youngest and least impressive. Joseph, more than any of his older brothers. Moses, even though Aaron speaks better than he does. Not to mention Rahab, who’s a prostitute and Ruth who’s an immigrant.

Then of course there’s Jesus, from an unimpressive backwater town born to poor parents and with no home to call his own.

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God tends to use those the world doesn’t spend much time admiring. This doesn’t mean of course that God doesn’t use others like us with more resources and education—but God seems to start with the unimpressive.

In this passage Paul tells us why: so that no one would boast in the presence of God. Perhaps Paul knew that American Royalty have so much to brag about that it’s pretty hard not to do so. With so much education and resources and connections, it’s hard not to feel pretty good about ourselves.

But when we brag about ourselves, it doesn't always turn out for the best. I recently saw a Ted Talk by Professor Irene Scopelliti. She did an experiment where she told some people to brag about themselves, and had others listen to them bragging, and then had them report whether they liked it or not. About seventy percent of the people had positive feelings while they were bragging about themselves, while only one in ten of the listeners had positive feelings!

Then she did another study with dating profiles. Turns out the more people bragged, the less people were interested in meeting them. (I may or may not be filing that tidbit away for future reference.)

NEWS FLASH: People don't really like when they have to listen to someone bragging. Then why do we do it? I found some other research about why. In 2012 Harvard University psychologists discovered that at a neural level, all of the pleasure synapses light up in our brains when we talk about ourselves—what we're doing, what we're good at, etc. Neurologically we get more pleasure talking about ourselves than we do talking about others. In fact, in further experiments they offered to give people money if they would talk about others—but people were willing to surrender up to 25% of their own money in the experiment if they could talk about themselves rather than talking about others.

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Now Paul couldn't have known about this neurological research, but I think he had an intuitive sense that people don't enjoy listening to other people brag. So could

so could that be why Paul tells us not to boast, so that we could win friends and influence people?

Well, as much as I'm sure Paul wants us to have more friends and experience greater community, that's not what he's up to. He isn't so much worried about whether we are boasting in general—he just wants to make sure that we don't boast in the presence of God,

*who is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God.*

It seems like Paul realizes that the more we are talking about ourselves—whether we are American Royalty or first century Corinthians—the less we are focusing on Jesus, on the One who gives us life...the One who let his body be broken and his blood be shed...the One who invites us to this table, again and again and again, to decenter us from all we think that we need to brag about...so that instead, when we boast, we will boast in the Lord.