

Boastful

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC
August 19, 2018
Text: Romans 5:1-5

*R: Anything you can do, I can do better.
I can do anything better than you.*

P: No, you can't.

R: Yes, I can.

P: No, you can't.

R: Yes, I can.

P: No, you can't.

R: Yes, I can, Yes, I can!

*P: Anything you can be, I can be greater.
Sooner or later I'm greater than you.*

R: No, you're not.

P: Yes, I am.

R: No, you're not.

P: Yes, I am.

R: No, you're not!

P: Yes, I am, Yes, I am!

So, do you recognize this song? (*pause*) Hint: It's from a Broadway show. Hint: It was written by Irving Berlin. Hint: The female character was named Annie and the male, Frank. (*pause*)

Okay, the song's title is "Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better" and the show was "Annie Get Your Gun." It is the fictionalized story of a real person, Annie Oakley, who was a star in the touring Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows of the late 19th century. Annie, a sharpshooter, had a romantic interest in one of

the other sharpshooters in the show, Frank Butler, and the Broadway show tells their story, replete with several songs so well known they are still familiar to us today even though the show first opened on Broadway in 1946.

What is it about this song that is so appealing? Maybe it's the basic assumption that we've all encountered when co-workers assume they're better than us at something. Maybe it reminds us of those times when we know we could have done whatever it was faster and better than somebody else. And, maybe, if we're honest, its bouncy lyrics recall a time when we were just a little too cocky, a little too self-assured, a little too convinced we must be better than whomever. In other words, this fun song captures that at times we are just too preoccupied with singing our own praises to truly be attentive to whatever else was going on. This is, I am afraid, a symptom of the sinful condition of human arrogance, a topic of much interest to our friend, the Apostle Paul.

Paul writes about this tendency of being boastful in the section of Romans we read this morning from Chapter 5. But he's not writing about boastfulness in the same way we usually think of it. Instead he is using boastfulness as a back door into talking about sin and grace and the new life possible through faith in Jesus Christ and the unrestrained love of God made real in Jesus. But, in typical Paul fashion, he sort of talks in circles which makes what he is trying to say a little difficult to figure out.

He begins by talking about something he calls justification. This refers to the forgiveness of sins exemplified in Jesus' death on the cross and subsequent resurrection. In theological terms, this is known as atonement theory or, put another way, explaining why Jesus' death on the cross is vital and how is it connected to the forgiveness of sins for all humankind. Paul's understanding of this is a foundational piece of all atonement theory and he begins to articulate its nuances in this brief text we read today. Basically, Paul sees justification as the doorway leading to salvation, or eternal life in heaven with Jesus. Justification to Paul occurs when Jesus dies on the cross, taking on the sins of all humanity as he does. When a person recognizes and accepts Jesus' death as the supreme sacrifice one can make for another in order to create a new pathway for anyone to access God's boundless love, then, Paul says, that person has been justified before God.

Paul goes on to explain that this newly found status of justification has real implications for how someone lives their lives each day. First of all, it is justification that Paul says "gives us access to this grace in which we stand." In other words, we only receive the gift of God's grace, God's forgiveness and love freely given and received, by accepting justification. It is this grace, then, which forms the foundation not only of our faith but of how we live our lives in harmony with God's will each day. This

is where Paul now starts talking about how we can, because we are justified, boast of the hope we have.

So, is this boasting like the “anything you can do I can do better” kind or is it something else? As it turns out, the Greek word the NRSV translates as “boast” can also be translated as “rejoice” or even “exult.” In a way rejoicing or exulting in this newly found hope feels like it makes more sense than boasting, but I am not convinced this is what Paul meant. I think he did mean boast in the sense of bragging. Paul sees the gift of God’s grace made accessible to us through Jesus as a something whose value and worth is impossible to quantify. How do you measure God’s love, especially when that love is unwarranted and unearned by any of us? Paul believes all humans fall short of the life God intended humans to live when God created them. God wanted humans to live lives of joy, peace, justice and unbounded love but humans proved incapable of being content with these simple things choosing instead power, riches, wealth and control. Paul would argue that the human desire to be in control of everything, arrogance, is the sin that separates us from God. It is Jesus’ death on the cross that proves how foolish and sinful that desire for control is for that is what killed Jesus. God’s gift of the resurrection to Jesus reveals once and for all that power resides with God and God alone. In spite of God’s ability to do anything with us God chooses, God chooses love freely given and received.

It is this gift of love which provides the foundation of hope that is already in the process of becoming reality. That is why we can rejoice in our hope. That is why we can boast of our hope in new life always possible through Jesus.

But Paul also talks about boasting in another way. He talks about boasting of suffering and this we need to explore a little more. Again, whether we think of this kind of boasting as bragging or rejoicing, it's more than a little weird to think of boasting about suffering. Make no mistake, Paul means real suffering – as in physical illness and injury, as in persecution for one's faith, as in not enough to eat or a place to sleep. This is what he says we can boast about?? Yes, but not in the way we think. What he's really saying is that we should not get hung up on the unfairness of suffering when it comes our way. Suffering is just part of life, Paul says. What matters is how one endures, makes sense of the suffering. Paul is reminding us that when we are suffering – physically, mentally or emotionally – we can choose to wallow in the suffering with a “poor me” attitude OR we can choose to see in suffering an opportunity to become a stronger, wiser person in God. This is what he is talking about when he says suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope, a kind of hope that does not disappoint us. In other words, Paul says, when you are suffering – and we all do at one time or another, in one way or

another – when you are suffering, you must do the hard work of finding value in the way you handle that suffering. You must find the inner reserves to endure through the suffering by focusing on the hope at the end of it all. Then, as you endure, your inner being, your character, becomes stronger and stronger. This newly discovered inner strength is what allows you to claim the hope that already exists in you because God loves you completely, through and beyond any suffering and pain.

I think these words are truly powerful and beautiful. They can be anchors when we are thrust into a sea of turmoil as personal or physical or emotional problems rock our lives unexpectedly. But there is still a danger here. And it is a subtle one, yet so very important to recognize. That is the danger of reveling in suffering *because* you believe it will bring you closer to God. This was a real problem in the early centuries of Christianity when ascetics believed the more you punished your body physically, the closer you got to God. Stylites were early Christian aesthetes who lived their entire lives sitting on the top of a tall column, exposed to the elements and never able to lie down. The most famous of these was Simeon Stylites the Elder who climbed up on a pillar in Syria in 437 CE and stayed there until his death 37 years later! Similarly, Anchorites were Christian aesthetes, usually already living in a Catholic religious order, who had themselves permanently walled into their monastic cell or room.

A little slit was present so food could be passed in and out but that was pretty much it. Several Anchorites became quite well known with the most famous of these being Julian of Norwich who lived in England in the 14th-15th century.

Still other forms of Christian ascetism have in the past and still do practice what is called mortification of the flesh. If you've read *The DaVinci Code* or seen the movie, you know about the semi-secret society known as Opus Dei. One of the main villains in the movie, the albino monk Silas, is seen by the audience whipping himself into collapse with a cat of nine tails. He also wears a cilice, a metal chain with little prongs affixed tightly around the upper thigh to induce pain, in the belief that punishing himself as Christ was punished with pain will purify him of his sins. While Dan Brown greatly exaggerated the influence of Opus Dei, it is a real organization and some of its more zealous members still practice corporal mortification to purify themselves.

This extreme behavior of searching out suffering for the sake of suffering along with Christ is NOT what Paul had in mind when he talks about boasting of sufferings. Paul is not urging people to suffer in order to deepen their love of Christ or improve their worthiness before God. He is actually saying the exact opposite. Don't seek out suffering, he says, because it will come to you anyway. That's life. But when it does come to you, know that it is not from God who only comes to you bearing love and forgiveness

without end. Instead, when suffering comes your way, make up your mind to endure knowing that by enduring you are making yourself stronger and giving life to the hope for new life already becoming real as God's gift to you.

Yes, Paul was boastful. And he encourages us to be boastful too. But not boasting for the sake of telling everyone how great you are, how you can do anything better than they. That's not Christian. That's not helpful. That's not even true, and you will never, ever find the kind of life God wants you to have that way. Instead, boast of your joy in the love of God that fills your life. Boast of this church and the real difference we make in this community and the world. Boast about the people here who love God and care about God's beloved people and Creation so much that we are willing to sacrifice our time, talent and treasure routinely to share in God's work in the world. Boast about the difference God makes in *your* life even as you testify that God can make such a difference in anyone's life. Boast about the hope already becoming real here and anywhere God's love is recognized and cherished. And always remember, anything you can do God can do better. So be humble, be hopeful, be enduring, be strong in faith. The rest is up to God. Amen.