

Righteous Bragging

Romans 5:1-11

Cradock Presbyterian Church

May 26, 2013

Bragging is pretty predictable. It's always about how much better you are, or how much better off you are, than the person hearing the bragging. There are lots of ways people do that. The "numbers game" is one of the most popular. You know, like, "I ate 55 tacos at Taco Bell last night!" Get away from me... "I have over 10,000 baseball cards in my collection!" Hey, great. But do you have a life? "I've been to all 50 states." And they all kicked you out, right?

Sometimes we brag about how good our "stuff" is. My stuff is better than your stuff. "I drive a *Porsche*." It's always a *Porsche* when you own one, just a *Porsche* to everyone else. "I've got the newest iPhone." Or Android, whatever. Too bad the people on the other end *listening* can't *see* it. "My house has 5 bedrooms!" There you go, a two-fer: how good it is AND some numbers. A subset of this is the "bigger" thing. "My riding mower is bigger than yours." Oh good. Hey, why don't you go drive it on the interstate? Bank accounts are another one of those "bigger" things, that sometimes get bragged about subtly. The newest one, maybe egged on by TV ads, is *how big your weight loss has been*. I'm particularly sensitive to this one. You know what those people are actually saying? "I was so fat it was sickening!"

The worst numbers I hear people brag about are their IQ. I've known plenty of people with high IQs (supposedly) and next to no common sense. I bet you've known some people like that, too. The question I always want to ask is, "Then don't you know enough to not brag about it?"

It's all about being better than you. It's all one-upsmanship. And I think it's about trying to make the other guy or gal jealous.

When we brag about all kinds of things we did, or are connected with, or have some claim on, it's all about us. Would it make sense to brag about things we have nothing to do with? I've never heard anybody brag on a *total stranger's* car, or wife, or college degrees, or house, or whatever. "Yeah, that huge building over there - it's magnificent, isn't it? It took a lot of effort and brains to build that. I had nothing to do with it." "I'm so proud of those kids! Just look at 'em! I don't know who they are; I've never seen 'em before; but I'm proud anyway." "Take it from me - Harvard is a *great* school, just the best. Me? Oh, I graduated from VCU." No, we brag about things *we* did, or own, or have some connection with.

So, bragging about ourselves *does* make people jealous. Those people who leave the price stickers up, in the window of their new car? Makes some of us feel bad. The guy who just got the promotion and brags about it? Deep down, you wish *you* had a better job. About the only thing along these lines I don't have a problem with is a young lady showing off her engagement diamond. You oughta be proud, and it *is* a way of "making the announcement."

As a general rule, engagement diamonds aside, Paul, like you and me, thinks bragging or boasting is a bad thing. Just a couple of chapters before this passage, Paul has this to say; "Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded." He was making the point that we are not made right with God by our own works, but by God's work in Jesus Christ. Like those ridiculous examples of people bragging on things that had nothing to

do with them, Christians who brag about their salvation, Paul seems to say, just really don't understand it. They didn't have anything to do with it – it was God who did all the work, by coming to us as Jesus and dying on a cross. There was no work those braggers did to become a part of that – it was simply a gift. Now, of course, we *do* brag on gifts, especially at Christmas. The kids with the hottest new gift are the ones most likely to tell *all* their friends. Didn't it feel cool to be the first to have something? But what if *everyone* got *exactly the same* gift? What would be the point in bragging? Paul would say, "Exactly!" Jesus Christ died on the cross for the sins of the *entire* world, not just for a few. So why are *you* bragging? Since we are all alike under the eye of God, and in brotherhood and sisterhood with Jesus, it ought to be ridiculous to try to get anybody jealous.

But then Paul changes his direction. I think he changes his direction because he knows: there are an awful lot of people out there who don't have Jesus to brag about. And that's where we are, in this fifth chapter of Romans, in the part of the letter where Paul talks about *how* we should brag. "We boast," he says, "in our hope of sharing the glory of God." This boasting, this bragging, how does it work? Well, it's not about *our* accomplishments. "The glory of God" means either "the glory that is God's" or "the glory that comes from God." We didn't *earn* it, so we can't brag that way. It's not ours – it's God's – so we can't brag about it as if it's our own possession. But we *can* brag about it because we're connected with it! In our baptisms, we became a part of God's family; this gift of hope in glory is only available to those who belong.

Now, you'd think this would surely be enough to brag about; it's a very positive thing, it speaks well of us. But there are other things Paul wants to tell us to brag about. "Not only that," says Paul, "but we also boast *in our sufferings*, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us." It almost sounds like that "numbers" bragging: "Look, I've got more than just glory! I've got sufferings, and endurance, and character, and hope. What do *you* have?" NOW, it looks like you've got enough to brag about. And if you went that way, then you'd have missed the point entirely. The way Paul argues, the point he wants to make is at the beginning. He builds his case, just like they taught him in Pharisee law school. It's different from our kind of argument, where the point is at the end. The end point here, and the beginning point, too, is hope. Paul's point might be a little hard to fathom, but here it is: because of the reconciliation we have received through Jesus Christ, we have hope, and with it character, and with it endurance (since we know where we're headed), to get through the suffering. See how it works backwards? We're so sure of our being saved, so sure of God's love for us, that we can even brag about our suffering! Which makes no sense, because suffering is what we usually avoid. Suffering means things are NOT going well with you. Suffering is NOT something you point to, at least not most of us. That's so unusual, to brag about suffering, it's an automatic alert to anyone listening that *something different is going on here*. You know what that something different is: it's salvation, and a special relationship forever with God. So if we boast, if we brag, about our suffering, that points people to

the special relationship we have with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. That's a relationship filled with hope.

Well, what about this special relationship? How did it come to be? That's another source of bragging, because it's so different from the world's experience. The world teaches us to think of ourselves first. But Jesus didn't! Paul points this out clearly. "Rarely will anyone die for a righteous person," he says, "though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die." You know that's true; in the heroic actions of the fire and police departments in New York City on 9-11, and of a whole bunch of people this week in Moore, Oklahoma, we have seen examples of willingness to risk life for another, regardless of who they are or what their station is in life. They stand out because they are the *exceptions* rather than the rule. We are taught, and it is our instinct, to preserve our lives. That's why we celebrate Memorial Day every year. We celebrate that men and women have stepped outside of themselves, stepped away from that normal human tendency to avoid danger and save self. They stepped outside of it for something higher. In times of national emergency and threat, those whom we call "veterans" offer up their lives for the good of millions of people they'll never meet. They offer up the best of themselves, so that this great nation of ours, this "light on a hill," this "last best hope for humankind" can survive. We celebrate them because of the courage they showed, putting their lives on the line when every instinct in their bodies was screaming, "Run!"

It takes something like war or 9-11 or an EF-5 tornado for us to even consider doing what those veterans did, or those first responders. *And that's what makes the*

cross so powerful! Paul knows, and he says it: “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us.” We weren’t righteous; we weren’t even very good; but God still loved us, and wanted to reclaim us. So he became one of us, put his life on the line, and suffered death, the penalty *we* deserved; and then he conquered death, to prove his power. Well, where are we in all of that? We didn’t do any of *that* work!

Then there’s this: because we’re so full of ourselves, we make enemies of anyone who would “top” us, who would “outdo” us. We wage a subtle “war” against others, maybe even against all others. But the unbelievable thing Jesus did, he did for *us*. He paid the ultimate price to end that war, the war with sin. It’s very personal! How could you be an enemy of someone who did that for you? The simple answer is: You can’t! You can’t because God won’t allow you to remain an enemy, to remain estranged. That’s reconciliation, folks, and grace, too: *God* made the move to change us from enemies to friends, and family, and did it without requiring any “works” from us – just acceptance. And if we are no longer enemies, and we no longer face the penalty of death for our sin, then all we have to look forward to is *life*. Listen again to Paul’s words: “For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.” God loves us, and we are God’s *family*, not enemies; since God offers life to those he loves, to his own children, we have the guarantee of life. Without the reconciliation God did at the cross, we would have only this life, and then death. But instead, we have hope.

And that's the final reason to boast, according to Paul. "But more than that," he says, "we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation." Go ahead and brag! says Paul. You have the gift of eternal life, because of the reconciliation wrought by God. Brag about God, because he's been so wonderful to us. Because in hearing your bragging, what happens? That natural tendency to be jealous kicks in; those who hear you brag will want what you have, and so they'll come to God. Now that's a message we can take to heart this morning. As we pointed out, people brag when they think they've got something great, or they're connected with something special. If that doesn't describe us Christians, what does? We do indeed have something great: God's Holy Spirit with us, and eternal life before us. We have the constant guidance of Scripture, another gift from God, given through the work of those God reconciled and saved. And we're connected with something else pretty great: the eternal family of God, stretching back through the ages to today and beyond, which we call "the church". So, you don't like to brag? Sure, I know, it *seems* like a bad thing to call this "bragging." But what's wrong with making people want to have what we have, a life with God and eternal life? That's more along the lines of *sharing!* I think Paul would give his hearty approval to the conclusion I give you today: brag on, people of God! Get out into the world and strut your stuff! Make people jealous for the Lord – and then give them a way to change their jealousy to their own bragging. Open your mouths wide, and then your arms, and let the Holy Spirit work through your bragging. Put yourself on the line, like the veterans did, in the best interests of

everyone. If you do that, you'll have even more to brag about – and in a good, righteous way.

Let us pray: O God, you giver of all good gifts, we praise you for the brag-proof gift of salvation, a gift no one can top. Let us be the ones who make the world jealous for that gift, and then lead us to share it, so that all may brag on you. In Jesus' name we ask it, AMEN.