

“If You Have to Boast”
January 22, 2023

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

In classical times, the ancient city of Corinth was one of the most prosperous cities in all of Greece. Arguably just behind Athens in terms of power and reputation, Corinth had a population of around ninety thousand people. Moreover, Corinth had two major seaports for trading goods. All told, it was a hub of Greek philosophy and learning.

In a fascinating example of you can't always judge a book by its cover, however, ancient Corinth was also known as the city of love. A tall tower built in honor of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, stood high above the city. And down below the pinnacle of the tower, in the shadow of Aphrodite herself, a thousand sacred prostitutes, men and women, sold themselves for high prices on a daily basis.

A few generations later, the Roman Empire demolished the city of Corinth in the year 146 B.C., leaving the city in ruins. But by the time the Apostle Paul arrived in Corinth on his first mission, around two hundred years later in the year 51 A.D, the city had been mostly rebuilt and was flourishing once again.

Nevertheless, vestiges of ancient Corinth remained. A city filled with contradictions, even in Apostle Paul's day, Corinth was a thriving economic metropolis, brimming with intellectual energy. Simultaneously, it was a city filled with sin and debauchery as its citizens helped Corinth live up to a well-deserved historical reputation for lust, pleasure and passion.

By the time he sat down to write his first letter to the Corinthian church, the Apostle Paul had likely seen all the city's dichotomies firsthand. Chances are good Paul had rubbed elbows with some of Corinth's finest...professors, synagogue leaders, successful business people...many of them were proud members of the Corinthian church.

At the same time, Paul had likely been informed or perhaps had witnessed some of the city's depravities. Paul had heard people in the Corinthian church tell him about cases of incest, marriage infidelities, persons taking economic advantage of others, and various forms of abuse and discord. The ones taking part in illicit activity were also a part of the Corinthian church and Paul could not ignore them.

To describe trying to pastor in Corinth as a challenge would be an understatement. Anything but homogenous, the congregation in Corinth would have been filled with high profile community dignitaries on the one hand. And social outcasts living on the margin of the Corinthian community on the other.

Knowing what we know then about the city of Corinth going back in time, if you were to put yourself in the Apostle Paul's place, his "to do" list as the pastor of the Corinthian church would logically start with one item. Namely, keeping all those people in line. How do you take an eclectic demographic of people and try to mold them into one unified community of believers? In other words, how do you convince a diverse set of parishioners to set common goals and agree on a basic behavioral covenant in order to live together as faithful followers of Jesus Christ? **(1)**

You would think the Apostle Paul would have been all about setting guidelines and then encouraging the Corinthians to buy into a shared notion of common rules and practices. The Apostle Paul, however, surveyed the Corinthian landscape and considered his church constituents before identifying what he envisioned as the biggest danger of all.

The particular danger Paul warned about is the subject of this morning's Scripture lesson. A scripture lesson where Paul talks about, of all things, "boasting." The dangers of boasting, actually. Which isn't exactly what anyone would have guessed...

According to the Oxford Dictionary, "boasting" is defined as "excessively proud and self-satisfied talk about one's achievements, possessions, or abilities." The question for today is, why would the Apostle Paul have been so concerned about "boasting" in Corinth?

I think Paul was playing the "long game" in this morning's passage. He was looking past the days when the people in Corinth would give up their self-serving, self-absorbed, self-gratifying ways. And move towards more selfless, God-centered ways. Practicing the kind of moral, upstanding behavior prescribed by Jesus Christ, which Paul preached about on a regular basis.

The Apostle Paul was making note of a universal human tendency. When you and I have accomplished something noteworthy. When we have consciously overcome something less than desirable about ourselves. When we have chosen gratitude and humility over power and pride and control. When we've changed someone or something for the better, our first tendency as human beings is to pat ourselves on the back. In order to recognize the significance of what we have done and to affirm our own righteousness for having done it.

But when we boast to ourselves and among ourselves about what we have accomplished without freely giving credit where credit is due, that's when boasting becomes dangerous. There was no way the Corinthian church could have moved collectively towards faithful, ethical conduct on their own. The only way they could have done that was with the immense help of God to guide them.

If the Corinthian church had occasion to boast about the people they were becoming, they needed to ground their boast in God. It was okay for the Corinthian church to step back and notice how far they had come. And to feel good about the steps they had made towards living together in faith and hope and love.

Still, the primary reason why those things came to pass in Corinth was God. God's guidance. God's mercy. God's forgiveness. God's inspiration. God's vision. God's strength. God's perseverance. It wasn't about who the Corinthians were and how they acted apart from God. It was all about who they were and how they acted because of God. And therein lay the danger Paul pointed out. Forget about resting on their own laurels. Paul wanted the Corinthian church to rest on God's laurels... (2)

Today is the day of our Wapping Community Church Annual Meeting. The time in the life of our congregation when we look back at the year 2022 we just left behind. And we look ahead to the year 2023. Today we remember special people among us who died in 2022, leaving their faithful mark and legacy among us. Today we also mark the highlights of the previous year and set goals and priorities and budgets to guide our various ministries as a congregation in the months to come.

When we sift through the milestones and the highpoints of last year, and consider the sheer number of them, we might be inclined to boast. In a year when a number of churches of all kinds were forced to cut back and even close because there weren't enough people or there wasn't enough energy or money to continue, Wapping Community Church was different. In a year when many churches focused inward in an attempt to ride out the pandemic, Wapping Community Church focused many of our efforts outward, reaching out to brothers and sisters in the greater South Windsor community and reaching out to men and women and youth and children in need with offerings and collections and gifts and hands-on service.

Most amazingly, in a year when many churches waited for people to come back and restore their life as a faith community to where it was before the pandemic started, Wapping Community Church may well have more people and more energy and more infectious spirit among us right now than we did prior to the pandemic. We're doing new things with new excitement and all kinds of people coming up with new visions and missions and programs every time we turn around.

Undoubtedly, there are huge numbers of people here at Wapping Community Church deserving of a pat on the back for where this church is on January 22, 2023. Yet, if we need to boast a little bit, if we have to boast, if we're going to boast, let's remember to give credit where credit is due. Let's rest on the right laurels.

If you've seen all the children coming to VBS and participating in the Christmas pageant and leaving for church school in a giant wave on Sunday mornings, offer God a word of thanks that we are passing faith onto the next generation. If you hear the choir singing beautiful music on Sunday mornings and inspiring us with special music at other times of the church year, God is being praised through their voices.

If you are ever here late in the afternoon on a Sunday and you notice all the youth here in this church building, God is enabling our young people find a safe and supportive community. If you've marveled at all the people volunteering for Foodshare or all the

sleeping bags we collected for Officer Barrett or all the people from this church volunteering at MACC and the Midwest Food Bank and elsewhere...that's God stirring in our hearts and empowering us to serve and give compassionately in the name of Jesus Christ.

The people who make our church property as magnificent as it is. They do it because they know God comes alive in the beauty of God's creation. The people who provide hospitality to this congregation in the form of food and welcome. They do it with God's blessing to guide them. The people who work quietly and tirelessly behind the scenes to keep Wapping Community Church strong and vital and healthy. They don't do it for their own glory. They do it to the great glory of God.

If we're going to take some time today, and in the days to come, to boast, let's be sure our boasting starts where it should. Feel free to boast about the God who has brought Wapping Community Church this far. And the God who has even bigger and brighter plans in store for this congregation in the future. Amen.

- (1) Rev. Dr. Yvette A. Flunder, *Where the Edge Gathers: building a community of radical inclusion*. (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005) pg. 100.
- (2) Ibid, pg. 101.

