

SERMON TITLE: "Boast in the Lord"  
SERMON TEXT: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: March 4, 2018, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

When I was a teenager, my pastor often told us about his call to ministry. Rev. Clapp said he resisted God's call at first, because he stuttered a lot. How could he be a preacher, when he couldn't even speak a clear sentence? He was sure God couldn't use someone like him. But once Rev. Clapp accepted God's call, God did use him. God helped him overcome his stuttering and become a faithful pastor who helped many people hear the gospel of Jesus Christ.

When Rev. Clapp told the story of how his ministry developed, he never took credit for himself. It was *God* who had healed him of his stuttering. It was *God* who gave him the ability to be a pastor. Rev. Clapp's confidence wasn't in himself. His confidence came only from *God's* healing and redeeming power in his life. His only boast was in the Lord.

In our scripture lesson from First Corinthians, we find the Apostle Paul had a similar perspective. There was nothing about Jesus' death on a cross that would naturally impress anyone, said Paul. Yet, God had turned the foolishness of the cross into the wisdom and power of God for salvation. Nor was there anything special about the people God had called. Yet, somehow, some way, God had chosen them for righteousness, holiness, and redemption.

The cross and the calling were the two reasons for Paul's spiritual confidence. This morning I invite you to look into this scripture with me and see how we, also, can boast in the Lord.

### **1—BOAST IN THE CROSS**

Like Paul, our boasting in the Lord begins with the cross. And by "cross," I don't mean a beautiful, honorable, tall, and sometimes lit-up symbol used to decorate the inside and outside of churches. And I don't mean a silver, gold, or gem-studded piece of jewelry used to adorn our bodies.

When Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:23 that Christ crucified was a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, he was reflecting on the experience of the cross at the time of Jesus. If we could wipe away 2000 years of church history and art, and go back in time, we would find ourselves huddled with the disciples, in fear for our lives. For them, the cross was an oppressive government's tool of execution. It was a symbol of fear and shame. It was the mark of a criminal. It was the waste of potential. It was a place of humiliation. It was the dark moment of death. Even for those who believed that Jesus was innocent of wrongdoing, the cross spelled the tragic end of a dream. How could the disciples have thought anything else, when they heard Jesus himself crying out in agony? Jesus suffered cruelty, torture, and injustice that he did not deserve. Jesus died. On a cross.

Since the crucifixion was so horrible for Jesus and for his closest disciples, what was anyone else to think? It's no wonder the majority of Jews thought the message of the cross was absurd. The Jews were raised on the stories of Father Abraham, Rescuer Moses, General Joshua, and King David. The Jews knew a savior when they saw one. They knew what power and victory looked like. That's why the Passover crowd asked Pilate to release Barabbas the insurrectionist. At least Barabbas had a track record of using force and violence to try to overthrow the oppressive government. Barabbas wasn't any pushover. Jesus, on the other hand, didn't even rise to his own defense. When Peter tried to draw a sword of protection, Jesus told him to put it away. Jesus went silently like a lamb to the slaughter.

To a people who valued political prowess and military strength, Jesus' death on the cross was an insurmountable stumbling block. It was absolute foolishness. Why would anyone think that he could win a victory through weakness?

We can understand that Jewish perspective, can't we? We in the United States of America have also been raised on the stories of power. Our heroes are General George Washington of the Revolutionary War, President Abraham Lincoln of the Civil War, and General Dwight Eisenhower of the Second World War. Any person who occupies the presidential office must be willing and able to serve as

Commander in Chief of the best-trained, best-equipped, most-powerful military force in the world. The conventional wisdom of our country is that it would be political suicide for a presidential candidate to declare himself or herself a pacifist or a practitioner of non-violent action.

And, in a sense, that's exactly what the messiah candidate Jesus did. Jesus' only action that could ever be construed as violent was his outburst in the temple, when he overthrew the tables and chased out the moneychangers. Otherwise, his energies were devoted to healing the sick, feeding the hungry, teaching the disciples, forgiving the sinful, blessing the merciful, and shining a light on the kingdom of God.

And that foolishness got him killed. End of story, said the Jews. Not even an exciting story, said the Greeks. But to those who were being saved, it was the power of God for salvation. We find it hard to understand. The sacrifice of the cross goes against every instinct we have for survival. But, somehow, in Jesus' willingness to absorb the violence and not strike back, God's power was manifest. God was able to turn that which seemed foolish and weak by human standards into something that had the power to change hearts, minds, and lives. The weakness of the cross is where we find our salvation. The cross is our number one reason for boasting in the Lord.

## **2—BOAST THAT GOD HAS CALLED US**

The number two reason that we can boast in the Lord is that God has called us. In verse 26 and following, Paul was making the point that, just as God used the foolishness and horror of the cross to bring about salvation, so God used people of lowly stature to carry the gospel message. Paul told the Corinthians, "Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were influential; not many of noble birth." Paul went on to say that God chose "the foolish . . . the weak . . . the low and despised."

Maybe some of the Corinthians understood right away what Paul was saying. Maybe they could humbly relate to the idea that their lives didn't amount to much. Maybe they were of the servant class, and they readily agreed that they came to Christian faith without pedigree or earned rights. But it's also

likely that some of the Corinthians wanted to shout back at Paul, “Speak for yourself!” Calling them “foolish . . . weak . . . low and despised” was pretty harsh. They may have taken offense. Putting folks down like that is a strange way to encourage and bolster the people in your spiritual care!

But Paul certainly included himself in this category of those whom God had called out of their nothingness into life in Jesus Christ. Paul was reminding the Corinthians that none of them, himself included, were self-made wonders. As they stood in the awesome presence of God, there was nothing spectacular that they could claim. They weren’t success stories of salvation and holiness all on their own. By themselves, they had no reasons for boasting.

You know, even people who are famous or strong in the eyes of the world recognize that they are really weak. Muhammad Ali isn’t someone most of us would have considered timid or afraid. Yet, before he died, the former world champion boxer supposedly told the story about a particularly humbling moment from his teen years. He had a crush on a girl named Areatha Swint. Seventeen-year-old Ali sometimes walked Areatha home from school. One day, as they reached the top stair of her apartment house, Ali worked up the courage to turn around and kiss her. And then he promptly fainted. When he came to at the bottom of the steps, Ali was so upset that he ran all the way home.

We have all had times when we were embarrassed, ashamed, or afraid. We have all had times when we felt alone, inadequate, or like a fish out of water. No matter how much we brag about our accomplishments, dress ourselves up, or surround ourselves with fancy things, we all know that we are pretty insignificant. Yet, for reasons only divine love would understand, God has reached down from the glories of heaven to call us to salvation. God has picked us up out of the mud of sin, washed us off in the waters of baptism, educated us in the good news of Jesus Christ, and empowered us with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It isn’t because of our worthiness. It’s all because God has called us. And that’s a great reason to boast in the Lord.

**CONCLUSION**

In a few minutes, we'll receive the sacrament of Holy Communion that commemorates Jesus' willingness to live and die faithfully on our behalf. One of the early Methodist communion hymns written by John Wesley's younger brother Charles Wesley goes like this:

Come, sinners, to the gospel feast;  
let every soul be Jesus' guest.  
Ye need not one be left behind,  
for God hath bid all humankind.  
Come, all ye souls by sin oppressed,  
ye restless wanderers after rest;  
ye poor, and maimed, and halt, and blind,  
in Christ a hearty welcome find.

I might add another verse that would go like this:

Come, travelers, in the spiritual quest.  
Even if you have given your best,  
the cross of Christ is here for you;  
boast in the Lord, who calls you too.

Let's accept the call to claim and proclaim the cross and salvation of Jesus Christ. Let's stop relying on ourselves. Let's boast in the Lord!