

6th Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 7.5.15

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Mark 6:1-13

Paul isn't someone who tends to evoke a lot of sympathy. These days, the apostle Paul is often written off as highhanded and overly sure of himself, not to mention sexist. But I don't think he was any of these things.

Consider the man we meet in the second letter to the Corinthians.

Corinth was one of the most important cities in Greece, situated as it was in the near center of this Roman province. Paul himself had brought the Christian message to this place and had, through his own work, established and built up the church body, this which would have received the letters "to the Corinthians."

Yet, not long into the collective life of this congregation, relations with Paul had grown tense, disturbed by suspicion and doubt. By the time Paul came to writing this section of what we know as his second letter to the Corinthians, but which was more likely his third or fourth or fifth letter to the church, things had deteriorated quite a bit—which explains the fierce tone of Paul's writing. He was fighting to win back the loyalty and trust of this people whom he'd served and come to love but who were they themselves enthralled elsewhere.

"Super-apostles," Paul mentions in his writing, people (apparently) whose charisma and strength of personality were what won converts—that is, rather than the gospel itself. That they themselves were fascinating rather than that God is love—this was their "secret sauce," these "super-apostles."

The Corinthians, it seems, were a people keen on exciting experiences. Like all people, they liked a thrill, a spectacle. And so they really loved the "super-apostles" who'd come to them, while Paul's apostleship, by contrast, was hardly showy, featured no heroics nor he any special spiritual prowess. No, Paul's apostleship, by contrast, offered up only teachings that were witness to Jesus' teachings and preaching that testified to the fruit that the good news was bearing forth in his life, which was fruit that could be born forth in others' lives as well. Paul's apostleship, in short, had integrity but not showmanship—and for this he was losing the love of a people that he would now fight to win back.

For he knew that he had no reason to envy the super-apostles or to feel threatened by them, no reason to regard himself as one whose gifts of the spirit were lesser in importance or power or truth than the spiritual gifts of these super-apostles. He knew that he had no less reason to boast than these who made it their evangelical practice to boast. After all, he'd had this amazing spiritual experience—brought up to the third heaven, it seems.

But he couldn't say as much because he also knew that to follow Christ is to do as Christ directed his disciples to do when sending them out two by two, that they take nothing for their journey except for a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts, not even the two tunics that were standard dress; nothing to emphasize the importance of the self so as to have nothing to distract from the importance of the gospel. Yes, he knew that to follow Christ is to do what Jesus himself did in Nazareth, never dazzling the people with power and personality, which Jesus, the most super of all super-apostles, could certainly have done, but instead to preach the good news of God's kingdom. Yes, of course, Paul knew that to follow Christ is to boast never on behalf of oneself but only of Christ—that is, to testify to this truth that victory is God's alone; to witness to what Christ has revealed for our well-being; and to confess that, by contrast, we are weak and in need of the sort of strength that can come only of the Spirit.

From this place of tension—acknowledging this weakness in apparent strength and fast in the faith of strength in apparent weakness—Paul wrote this painful letter to the Corinthians, begging them “Do bear with me,” a phrase that resounds with humanity as I think we seldom hear from Paul. “Do bear with me... Look at what is before your eyes. If you are confident that you belong to Christ, remind yourself of this, that just as you belong to Christ, so also do we [that is, Timothy and me]... We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves[--those super-apostles.] But when they measure themselves by one another, and compare themselves with one another, they do not show good sense. For it is not those who commend themselves that are approved, but those whom the Lord commends...

“So, do bear with me!” he begged. “I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by its cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you submit to it readily enough...

“But do bear with me,” he begged. “I think that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. I may be untrained in speech, but not in knowledge; certainly in every way and in all things we have made this evident to you.... But such boasters are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder! Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange if his ministers also disguise themselves as ministers of righteousness. Their end will match their deeds.

“So, bear with me,” he asked of them for, in order to show that his claims to apostleship are as good as those of his rivals, he would now do what he had just condemned his rivals for doing, that is, boasting about himself. But he would begin with a confession, “I am speaking as a fool.” But from there, “Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman—I am a better one: with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. In Damascus, the governor under King Aretas guarded the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches.”

Yet best of all, most boast-worthy of all, is this story that Paul presumably had been keeping quiet but now would tell because the Corinthians were now demanding that any who would guide them in the way of Christ must have had one or more rapturous experiences of the divine. So Paul wrote, boasting of himself (and so speaking as a fool yet doing so in the third person and so remaining in some small way humble): “I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven,” which was understood then to be the highest heaven, “whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows,” so he must have been alone at the time when he was taken up “—was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.”

All of this is to say that the Corinthians could trust Paul as someone spectacular while also trying very hard to do right by the gospel, writing as he did, “If I wish to boast...I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it so that no one will think better of me than is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations.”

Furthermore, he continued, “to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh... Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness.’... Therefore,” he concluded, “I am content with weakness, insults, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for wherever I am weak, then I am strong.”

Oceans of ink, of course, have been spilled in speculation of that thorn, as we wonder at what it might specifically have been. A physical disability? A mental illness? A spiritual torment or chronic temptation? Whatever it was, it was something that, at least in Paul’s own view, made him a less plausible and authoritative apostle for God. Whatever it was, it likely made the super-apostles seem that much more super by comparison.

Little church, don’t let anyone ever convince you that Jesus is more theirs than yours.

Quiet church, let's not ever believe that those whose faith is more overt, more outgoing, more showy or more at the ready to be "testified to" are therefore more super in their following Christ than we are.

When we "suddenly" took in so many new members this spring, people asked me, how had we done it, what had I done?

So many! All at once!

The answer to who we did it is, "Show up every Sunday, for a year, or five; for a decade or more." That's most of it. On top of that, though, try your best to be open to the Holy Spirit and trustful that where it leads is somewhere of some significance. Hold out hope that what you offer the larger body gathered here is, if a mess, then at least one someone else in the congregation might make some sense of, and receive what response you get in the sure knowledge that it will be enriching somehow. Have your answer be "Yes" as often as possible—"yes" to requests for favor, help, or for butting out; "yes" to what wonders, mysteries, vaguairies, disappointments life has on offer; "yes" to all you don't know. Believe those whom you serve—what they tell you, what they need. Finally, enjoy yourself. Really, enjoy yourself. Joy is attractive; joy is catchy. Plus, it's true. Joy is what's true.

But mostly, show up every Sunday for a decade or more.

That's the secret to success. Not too "sexy," not too thrilling, nothing a super-apostle might think to do: but I'm not a super-apostle, and (I hope you don't mind my saying) neither are any of you.

It's true that we could stand to be a little more vocal about our faith and our life together as a congregation of Christ's gathering. It's true that we could make the implicit invitation that all are welcome here slightly less implicit, that we could extend such invitation *explicitly* to any and all who'd do well to know themselves beloved, that they can find such love here. Yes, we could be less private about it all. It's not right that we be all "1%" with our spiritual riches, keeping to ourselves what God means for all.

To be honest, this is something I've been working on. At being more open about "what I do," that question that pervades in American socializing, at being more forthright that "I'm the pastor of the church in Monterey," I've been trying to say this

in a way not preemptively defensive or undermining of how truly I believe in what calls us together and for what purpose.

What about you? How about it? How about once this week, mentioning in comfortable conversation, with a friend or acquaintance or even stranger, your involvement in this congregation? Risk coming across as high-handed or overly sure of yourself, though, knowing you, I'd guess such an impression would wear off quickly. Risk coming across as someone on a mission. (That is what we are, after all—"mission" coming to us from *missio*, which also gives us "missive" or "dis-miss," which is to say, sent out. We are on a mission; we are sent out. So, go, let's go, assured that the mission is a good one, a needful one.) Risk being misunderstood, rejected, questioned as to your motives. Risk all this. After all, there are hungry people out there, I suspect—hungry for spiritual food. And perhaps they don't know that this is precisely what we serve—spiritual food; and that we serve it freely that all who eat it might be free.

Yesterday, perhaps you gathered for Independence Day picnics in celebration of freedom. Today, we will truly so feast. Maybe next year, there will be still more who'll join in.

Either way, though, thanks be to God.