

Being Weak (2 Cor. 12:2-10)

Given that the Cubs have drastically underperformed expectations this year, leaving them currently in last place, I've been pretty disgusted and disappointed. I don't see any shock on your faces ...

Anyway, the situation made me think about an interview one time with the Cubs' former manager. The Cubs were in last place in their division then, too, having lost twelve in a row to start the season. (Maybe you sense a theme emerging.) Actually, last place feels kind of like home if you're a Cubs fan. We get nervous when we can't see the cellar.

In the interview, the former manager mentioned that people weren't surprised that the Cubs were in last place. Instead, people were disgusted that the Cubs kept making mental mistakes—mistakes everyone assumed the new manager would have remedied. When asked why the Cubs kept making so many

stupid mistakes on the base paths, the manager replied that the players were making bad decisions about when to run (implying that as a nine-year-old he wouldn't have made those same mistakes—i.e., the players are kind of stupid), he complained that the fans nowadays want more runs scored (i.e., players are running more to please the rapacious desires of greedy baseball fans), and then he said that all the teams in baseball are experiencing similar difficulties (i.e., the Cubs are not unique in their dunderheadedness).

All of which, I suppose, is true, but then he went on to say something that we've all become accustomed to expecting leaders to say, "I'm not making excuses." At which point, I thought, "Man, I'd hate to hear the kind of tap-dancing this guy could come up with if he ever tried to make excuses."

Or, have you ever noticed that people who begin a sentence with "I don't mean to brag ... " usually continue by adding a **"but "** to

the sentence and conclude it by completely contradicting the initial statement about not wanting to brag?

“I don’t mean to brag ... but my little junior has the I.Q. of Albert Einstein, the grace of Baryshnikov, and the face of Wilford Brimley ... ok, so we’re hoping he grows out of that last one.”

I get some of this vibe for rhetorical sleight-of-hand when it comes to Paul. For example, I’ve always had trouble with our Scripture text for today. Sort of. Actually, our Scripture text for today is one of my all-time favorites, but it’s the context that gives me fits.

What do I mean when I say that?

Well, starting in chapter 10, Paul addresses a particular problem he’s having with the Corinthian church. It seems that in Paul’s absence, the Corinthian church has come under the influence of some other teachers.

Paul refers to them in chapter 11 as “super-apostles.” We don’t know who they are. They may be true apostles like Peter, James, or John, or they may be fly-by-night religious hucksters presenting themselves to the Corinthian church as “super-apostles.” We don’t know.

All we **do** know is that, either directly or indirectly, these “super-apostles” have caused the church at Corinth to question Paul’s authority.

We get the impression that these super-apostles cut fairly impressive figures because, by comparison, Paul’s reputation suffers. It seems they were mesmerizing speakers, enthralling the Corinthians. Consequently, we find Paul saying things like, “Now wait a minute, just because I happen to cut a less than impressive figure in the pulpit doesn’t mean I don’t have anything worth saying.”

Bad situation. Whether these “super-apostles” meant to discredit Paul or not, they’ve caused him an awful lot of grief with the church in Corinth. And so Paul finds himself defending against the Corinthian criticism.

Now, this is where I’ve traditionally run into trouble. I understand that Paul is trying to reestablish his authority—if I were in his position, I’d probably do the same thing—but in doing so, he seems awfully ... well ... boastful, which feels just as boorish as your uncle Kevin—the family’s standout Sean Hannity wannabe. But the problem is that Paul peppers the two chapters leading **up** to our Scripture text today with assertions that he doesn’t want to ... wait for it ... boast. He goes so far as to say that we ought to be extra suspicious of people who brag.

He makes comments in chapter 10 like, “We do not dare to classify ourselves or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves. But when they measure themselves by

one another, and compare themselves with one another, they do not show good sense” (2 Cor. 10:12).

Or, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. For it is not those who commend themselves that are approved, but those whom the Lord commends” (2 Cor. 10:17-18). He then immediately follows that verse by saying, “I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness” (2 Cor. 11:1a)—which is Paul’s way of introducing the back of his own *Apostolic baseball card* because Paul then takes off and begins talking about all of his experiences as an Apostle—in an attempt to establish his credibility.

In chapter 11, he goes on to say, “I repeat, let no one think that I am a fool; but if you do, then accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little” (2 Cor. 11:16).

All of which sounds to me like Paul is saying, “You shouldn’t listen to people who brag about themselves. It’s God, and not us, who

raises people up ... but as long as we're on the subject, let me tell you about a few things ... "

In other words, "I don't mean to brag, but ...

Are they Hebrews? 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 have I 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 (2 Corinthians 11:22-27).

I don't mean to brag, but ... Yikes!

How do we reconcile this apparent contradiction? First, Paul says we shouldn't boast, but then, he turns around and lays out his resumé. What are we supposed to do with this?

This passage has caused plenty of mischief over the years. These kinds of things give Paul a bad reputation with sophisticated modern folks.

"Yeah! I mean, he puts down boasting and bragging, all right, but deep down, he's the biggest gasbag of them all." Do you see the problem here?

But then I was reading all the material leading up to our Scripture text today, and I got to thinking, "If we take seriously what Paul's been saying, then it looks like bragging is the last thing Paul wants to do. It feels like they've had to drag this information out of him just by their hard-headedness. He doesn't want to have to compare himself to these super-apostles, but he can't think of any other way to ensure that the Corinthians will remain faithful to the gospel they heard from his lips.

Paul has to make some kind of dramatic play for their attention. Logic and appeals to their sensibilities appear ineffective. And so,

reluctantly, he unmask himself before them—realizing all the while that in doing so, he runs the risk of being misunderstood. He faces the possibility that they'll hear only, 'I don't mean to brag, **but** ... '"

Gutsy move if you ask me.

So why did he do it? Why did he take credit for being a good Jew, for the whippings and the canings, the stoning, the shipwrecks, the hunger, and the nakedness?

In our Scripture text for today, why did he take credit for the visions and revelations of being caught up to Paradise (which, while stated in the third person, appears to be a thinly veiled reference to himself)?

Why did he take credit for all of that?

Well ... actually... he didn't. He didn't. He didn't take credit for what or where he was born. He didn't take credit because he didn't have anything to **do** with it.

He didn't take credit for the visions and revelations because he didn't conjure them up by himself. He was the **recipient** of those.

He didn't take credit for surviving the perils thrown at him. Paul didn't take credit for any of it. Judging by his response to the thorn in the flesh, I think it's safe to say that any time Paul, like the rest of us, got in trouble, he prayed for God to take it away.

He didn't brag about being really strong and biting the bullet.

Indeed, if you were beaten once or shipwrecked at sea on vacation that one time (like some Reader's Digest, *Drama in True Life* TM), you might be inclined to chalk up surviving to grit and determination.

But when you survive ***repeatedly***, you've got to start asking yourself some hard questions about who's actually pulling you out of the drink.

It would be easy to think of ourselves as strong people who showed some American guts and ingenuity by surviving one or two of those ordeals. People make all kinds of money on both the Lifetime Network and the Discovery Channel, extolling the virtues of the courageous survivor.

We might be inclined to take the credit if it happened once or twice. But if it happens repeatedly, that's an entirely different story.

Why?

Well, when you stack them all up, it's easy to see that the only way you make it through that much pain without the ugly face of bitterness or the brash mask of pride poking their heads into the

picture is by understanding that it we can endure such affliction only by God's grace.

So, is Paul bragging?

Yes and no. Yes, he certainly is bragging, but he's not bragging about anything **he's** done.

He's bragging about a God who can take a reprobate church persecutor and all-around weasel and make him a vessel of grace to the church.

He's bragging about a God who can heal the wounds of a thousand scars.

...about a God who can shield us from the stone or the storm.

... about a God who can feed the hungry and clothe the naked.

He's bragging, when all is said and done, about a God who can transform people's lives so that they don't have to rely any longer on their own limited resources and stunted visions of success.

Instead, Paul sketches the portrait of a God who allows people to see themselves as they truly are—broken, beaten, shipwrecked, lost, hungry, and naked—but loved ... often in spite of themselves.

And when we finally understand ourselves as the **tools** of God's grace and not its engine, we can recognize our entire lives for what they truly are—a gift.

And knowing that our lives are a gift, we're empowered to give them away.

As long as we think that what we have, who we are, and what we've endured depend solely upon **our** initiative and the strength of **our** own determination and courage, we wind up flailing about, convinced we can do God's work better than God.

Whenever we start thinking it's about **us**, we lose the ability to offer ourselves to the world as a fragrant offering of love and sacrifice.

It's not until we let go of the idea that something native to our own virtue is what allows us to become the people God wants us to be that we'll ever be able to taste the life God has in store for us.

In a world that clings so tenaciously to its notions of strength and wealth, in a world that relentlessly pursues a thousand and one meaningless fads, in a world that communicates the ideal of success as a heroic feat of self-determination—we have been called to let go.

Paul pleads with us to let go of the idea that our lives and futures are ours to secure. In fact, our lives belong to **God**, who promises

to walk with us into our uncertain futures ... whether or not success, the way we typically think of it, lies ahead of us.

Actually, the way Paul puts it is, "I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).

I don't know about you, but that's good news to me because ... and I'm not boasting ... I'm weak ... a lot.

Thank heavens God's not.

—Amen.