**1 Corinthians 1:26-31** February 2, 2020

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Epiphany 4

*26Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 27But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, 29so that no one may boast before him. 30It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. 31Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Being Okay with What I See in the Mirror**

Respect. I know of no sane person who does not want it. Even very odd and peculiar people with strange habits, whom we think apparently couldn’t care less about what people think—they appreciate respect. You think, “But if you want to be respected, why do you dress that way? Don’t you realize? Why do you act that way? Do you think that helps?” There are a hundred different reasons. Some have just gotten so used to disrespect that they have given up. Doesn’t mean they don’t hunger for respect. Sometimes there is something broken inside. Sometimes they were born broken, sometimes the cruelties of this world broke it. But if you can cut through the fog and let in a sliver of light at least for a fleeting moment, you will see them smile over the dignity of respect.

Most of us have lived enough of life to know what sorts of things we can and can’t do if we want to maintain public respect. We figure out what we can let out in public to roam the streets, and what sorts of things we need to let out only in guarded company as if in a fenced in yard; and what sorts of things we need to keep private. There are some dreams we tell everyone at work and laugh over. Some dreams we cautiously, haltingly tell *the one* person we can tell anything to. And some dreams we don’t even repeat to ourselves, lest we lose even our own self-respect.

Learning about respectability accounts for a lot of the angst of those teenage years. There you spend most of a decade learning the hard way what you can tell people and they will sort of understand where you’re coming from, and what sort of things will make people start looking for the door. Those were tough years!

Respectability. For some it comes pretty naturally, others learn respectability through hard knocks, and others never quite get it. It doesn’t mean they don’t desire it. It just means they are trapped in a dance they can’t quite learn the steps to.

Respectability was an issue for the Corinthian Christians.

I have mentioned, when we have studied this first letter to the Corinthians at other times, the church at Corinth was a problem church. They had numerous scandals, any one of which would have made the local news headlines, a couple maybe even the national news. When you read this book of the Bible, it’s shocking to think that this was a Christian congregation. One wonders, “How could they be called Christians?” But before you judge too harshly, remember: this entire congregation was new converts. There were zero—zero—long-term Christians among them. All of them came fresh out of a pagan background where Hollywood-like immorality was the norm for everyone. And so even while we might be scandalized by the things they did, we need to notice something else. The Holy Spirit always addresses these people as Christians. They knew Jesus. They knew he is their Savior. They were little children in faith, only learning day by day. They made mistakes, big mistakes. But they are children of a patient loving heavenly Father.

But back to the respectability thing. As you might expect in a group like this—adults plucked by God fresh out of a different world—they were trying to maintain respectability. Likely as not, they were trying to prove to their co-workers and their in-laws that they had not lost their minds when they joined this new Christian thing. Yes, they had changed. They had found something new, totally different from what everyone else was doing. It was different, but they didn’t want to be dismissed as oddballs.

These Corinthians were wrestling with the issue of respectability. The Holy Spirit had worked faith in their hearts. They thought that was great. But when they started to talk about this Christian stuff to their friends and co-workers, they got that look. You know, when people start looking for the door. These Corinthians wanted this Christian stuff to be more respectable.

That this was going on—this desire to maintain respectability in a heathen society—that this was going on is implied a paragraph or two before our reading. There Paul said to these Christians, *“The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”* Paul basically tells them, “You can’t help it. To the world you Christians *do* look like you have lost your minds. That just the way the cross is! It is God’s plan. It is wise. It is wonderful. It is free. But the human mind counts it foolishness.”

Ever been there? Your faith and the fact that you spend healthy amounts of your time and money on this Jesus thing, you ever feel like it makes you a little less respectable to some people?

You hear it a hundred ways. People say that people who believe this stuff are too weak, they must need a crutch. Others label true believers as “clingers.” Other dismiss faith, especially the Christian faith, as “the opiate of the masses”—drugs for the feeble of mind. It irritates us. It outrages us. “We’re not idiots! We’re not below respect!”

I can remember it. Like another man named Peter, only he was warming his hands around a fire while I was sitting at an outdoor lunch break table. I remember feeling that disrespect—and folding for the sake of respect. How shameful! Desire for respectability isn’t always a bad thing. It keeps us from picking our nose in public. It keeps us from cussing like a sailor in polite company. It has its points. And the desire for respectability makes cowards of people when the right thing before God is not the popular thing before people. Lord, forgive us!

Paul confronted the Corinthians with the lie of worldly respectability when he said, ***“Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.”***

These Corinthians needed to stop trying to find their worth in the approval of the world. They needed to remember that their respectability rested on the fact that God had chosen them. No one, no prophet, no holy man or woman has ever been chosen by God for any reason other than God’s totally undeserved love. The things that earn the world’s respect are nothing before God.

Which is exactly why God took—and still takes!!—special joy in using ***“the foolish thing of the world to shame the wise… the weak things of the world to shame the strong… the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.”***

Verse 30 approaches this from another angle: ***“Christ Jesus has become… our righteousness, holiness and redemption.”*** Again, not us, but Christ Jesus did it. God the Father chose us, and God the Son supplied what we lacked. He lived without sin (holiness), he obeyed every law of God (righteousness), and he paid the price for our moral failures (redemption.) It’s Jesus’ achievement, not ours. Again, things respected by the world supply nothing that we need. It is all God’s gift.

God smiling on us for absolutely no reason whatsoever other than that God wanted to smile on us, this is the Christian message. And the world doesn’t like it. It negates all the things this world is obsessed with: bling and good looks and witty words and posh wealth. “You mean absolutely none of it matters to God?” “None of it.”

When we realize that God has freely granted us his favor through Christ Jesus, we can bask in God’s love like a cat in the afternoon sun. When we stop taking cues from the world, “Do you approve?”, we become like Jesus’ disciples listening to the Beatitudes in our Gospel reading. Jesus wasn’t telling people how to get into heaven in those verse (Blessed are the poor in spirit… the merciful… the meek, etc.) He was telling people who already had heaven to not even begin to worry about respectability in the eyes of the world. Being poor in spirit, meek, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, etc. the world does not respect these things. But they are things that God loves to see and blesses.

Knowing that we stand in God’s favor even when the world frowns on us, that is liberating. No longer do we need to pretend or posture. I can be weak, challenged, ugly, poor and yet not feel inferior, because God loves me for Jesus’ sake. I can be athletic, brilliant, good-looking, rich and still not worry about holding on to my respectability because God loves me for Jesus’ sake.

Suddenly worldly respectability becomes a non-issue. Sure, if the world chooses acknowledge something I have accomplished, well enough. But it is just the world. And if the world should choose to revile me, that doesn’t matter either. It is just the world. Whether respected or not, I know that God has chosen me, and that Christ Jesus has supplied what I needed. Therefore you can confidently live out that declaration, ***“Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.”***

Which kind of makes me think of something that is going to happen about eleven hours from now. If you are a fan of the Kansas City Chiefs or San Francisco 49ers, this is a good year—especially if you are a Kansas City Chiefs fan. Last time the Chiefs were in the Superbowl I hadn’t even been born yet. That’s a long time ago!

Well, whoever wins, their fans will be insufferable. There will be celebrations, there will be hoopin’ and hollerin’ and there will be quite a bit of bragging, “We’re number one!” Which, when you think about it, is kind of silly. I mean, getting comfortable in front of a television with a pet, a delivered pizza and a two-liter of Coke—how does that give you bragging rights in a world championship sporting event? What have you contributed? Your athletic ability is negligible, your effort is limited to pushing buttons on a remote, and your financial contribution has been nothing. What gives you the right to celebrate?

Silly as it is, in a sense that is what it is to be a Christian. We get to celebrate, to share in the victory party, to hoop and to holler, not because of a blame thing we did, but because of something someone else did. We realize that whether our victory in Christ wins the world’s respect or not doesn’t matter. The victory is ours, and if the world chooses to look down its nose at our victory in Christ Jesus, that matters about as much as the sour grapes the Superbowl losers throw at the winners. It just doesn’t matter. We’re not in it for respectability in the world’s eyes.

Let that be your freedom. Walk out into the world today in confidence thinking these words, ***“Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.”***