

# SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## “Undeserved: Humble Brags”

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

May 1, 2022

We continue this morning in our post-Easter series called “Undeserved.” Starting with the resurrection of Jesus, we’re considering all the ways the grace of God speaks into every aspect of our lives as followers of Jesus, into our lives as individuals, and into our collective life as a church, leading up to the celebration three weeks from today of 75 years of ministry at this church.

I’m grateful to Pastor Mark for offering a sermon sent from my quarantine last week—and thank you for all the well wishes, by the way; it was a very mild case. But last week we looked at how Paul spoke of the surpassing value of knowing Jesus and his resurrection, of greater value than anything else he had ever gained in his life. The real twist was that in the case of this particular “gain,” that is, knowing Jesus, he really couldn’t take credit for it. It was undeserved. It was a act of grace by God first and foremost.

And this week we go to another of Paul’s letters, 2 Corinthians, in which he offers us to consider grace in perhaps a different way. Good things that we don’t deserve, that we didn’t earn for ourselves, it’s pretty straightforward to consider those things to be gifts of grace. But what about things we wouldn’t consider to be so good? Can those be gifts of grace as well? Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third 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— was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. 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 power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.*

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Today you have the privilege of receiving a tutorial in a time-honored tradition. It's something that has been around for ages but has seen something of a renaissance with the burst of social media, and that is the subtle art of the humble brag.

You familiar with this? Even if you haven't heard that term, you know what it is. You know it when you hear it. It's when someone offers a comment that tries to come across as self-deprecating or humble, but really it's all just a guise to promote yourself or point out something cool or good about yourself.

Folks have always done that; that's nothing new. Across the centuries it's one of those qualities that transcends culture: people tend not to like a braggart and would prefer someone to at least *act* like they're humble.

But wow has gasoline been thrown on that fire once social media became a regular part of interaction. If you find yourself wanting to humblebrag with the best of them, pick up the book *Humblebrag: The Art of False Modesty* by Harris Wittels, who introduces himself as Harris Wittels, "who would love some free time but has been too busy writing for *Parks and Recreation*, *Eastbound and Down*, and a bunch of other stuff #vacationplease." And in this book, he tracks, kind of jokingly but then kind of seriously too, all the ways that celebrities have refined this artform over their Twitter feeds, sending out updates to their adoring fans, but in a way that they hope won't make them look prideful to their adoring fans.

Some examples.

"Totally walked down the wrong escalator at the airport from the flashes of the cameras...Go me." -Joe Jonas of the Jonas Brothers.

"It always feels a little odd to me when I get recognized randomly in public. I never know what to say." -BitFunk. Don't know who that is? A music producer, who was of course humbled to win a Juno Award at some point.

"I just did something very selfless. But more importantly, it was genuine and I know it means a lot to the person in the long run." -Cheryl Yeoh, who's an entrepreneur and well-known angel investor, and apparently quite selfless.

Then maybe my favorite. LeVar Burton, yes *the* LeVar Burton, host of the show *Reading Rainbow* once posted, "It's a good night for natural light in LA," along with a picture of his fireplace. Now that doesn't seem too humble braggy, nothing wrong with a picture of a fireplace, until you notice that on the mantle of his fireplace are the 20 some odd Emmys he won over the course of his career.

Not to pick on celebrities or Hollywood too much, because let's face it, preachers can be some of the worst at this. I haven't gone through old sermons to analyze them, but I'm sure if you did, you'd find a good bit of humblebragging going on. But this one was great, from a *very* well-known pastor on his Twitter feed—and I won't say who.

"I'm truly humbled you follow my tweets. I pray they enrich your life and strengthen your ministry. God bless all 200,000 of you!" Truly humbled by all 200,000 of them indeed.

Point is, it's a well worn trail and a point of some universal ridicule of the masks we'll let ourselves wear, false donning modesty and humility when really we want to talk about ourselves.

And so what in the world does it mean for Paul to speak of boasting in weaknesses, like he does here?

In v. 5 he writes, “On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses.” And in saying “On behalf of such a one,” he’s referring to an individual he described in those opening verses, someone who was “caught up to the third heaven”—and he’s not entirely sure what that means—and “heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.” On behalf of someone like *that*, Paul says, he would boast, but on his own behalf he would not boast, except of his weaknesses.

And just there on the surface of it, that’s an admirable trait: to lift up someone else in praise and recognition, but to speak of yourself humbly, and doing so genuinely.

Just yesterday I heard a beautiful example of this very thing. As some of you know, yesterday we celebrated the lives of Led and Linda Gardner. (And the family had preferred a smaller, more limited service so we didn’t publicize it.) But after the service, I talked briefly with Fran Dotterweich—see even now I’m humblebragging; I talked with Fran Dotterweich yesterday. And as many of you know, Fran and Linda were very close, and Fran shared, “She was such a wonderful friend to me, much more so than I was to her.” Now, I’m pretty sure Fran was more than a faithful friend, but a lot of y’all know Fran. You know that wasn’t humblebragging. That’s from the heart. She was lifting up, boasting in the quality of another, of her friend.

But I have to be honest, when I come to this passage, and not just this past week, it’s generally been the impression I get from this, when I come to this passage of Paul talking about “boasting in his weaknesses,” my reflex is, “Oh come on.” Boasting in your weaknesses? Is that not the very definition of humblebragging? Of false modesty? Gets all the easier to be skeptical about this when you find out there’s a decent chance that when Paul is talking this person who was caught up into the “third heaven,” he’s actually referring to himself, just in the third person.

What Paul is addressing in the Corinthian church is that apparently a number of other “teachers” had emerged who were challenging Paul’s credentials and the teaching of the gospel. To do this, they would give testimony to some kind of spiritual revelation they had experienced, almost as a resume. As in, they would say, “I was given this revelation by God in the Spirit. So you should listen to what *I* have to say.”

So Paul tries to disarm them, kind of sarcastically at times. He calls them “super-apostles” in the previous chapter, if you can believe that. He’s saying, “You want spiritual credentials? I know someone who was caught up into the third heaven—indirectly referring to himself—but that’s not reason to boast.” And he might be doing the whole thing where you say, “Now I’m going to say that my spiritual credentials are even greater than theirs, but” and then he goes on to say precisely that. Y’all know the move. But he’s definitely undermining the way these false teachers are trying to assert themselves. “My own credentials, my own revelations, the ways in which God has made himself known to me, those aren’t the things that I’ll boast about. Instead, what I will boast about are all the ways in which I am weak.”

And he describes how he had been given a “thorn in the flesh,” “to keep me from being too elated.” Now folks have speculated as to what that could be referring to. A chronic medical condition? A physical ailment? Some kind of mental illness? A form of temptation? Even, some theorize, a recurring malarial fever. (Folks really have tried to figure this out.)

When it comes down to it, we don't know what it was because that's not the point. But it gets a bit harder to dismiss Paul as just humblebragging. He's speaking about some challenge he faces, in his body, in his mind, in his spirit, we don't know, but some challenge that's pretty serious, and he asks God to take it away, but he doesn't. And Paul considers that reason to boast; he considers the fact that he has this challenge, this obstacle, this weakness to be something to take pride in.

And why? Because of the response he gets: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." And so Paul concludes, "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me."

Think about what that's saying, that our weaknesses, our obstacles, our challenges could be signs of the grace and power of God.

Does that not run counter to everything our instinct tells us about weakness? We think about some challenge, some temptation, some ailment, and we think, this is something to be overcome, and in overcoming it, we will demonstrate our strength, our will. Or, if we can't overcome it, we hide it, we don't talk about it. We say, "Everything's fine; it's fine."

Now it's important at this point to clarify a few things Paul isn't saying. He's not saying, "Wallow in self-pity by bringing up your weaknesses all the time." Nor is he saying that we shouldn't or couldn't go to God in frustration as to why we're facing a hardship. (The testimony of Scripture tells us otherwise over and over. Nor, if this "thorn in his flesh" is meant to be some kind of temptation, is he saying, "Celebrate the ways we sin and fall away from the Lord.")

But Paul says, "When it comes to our weaknesses, don't hide it. Lift it up." And why? To make yourself look humble? No. To make yourself look faithful? Also, no. Why? Because what happens when you start doing that, when you start lifting up the ways in which we are challenged? It means the focus for what is accomplished in spite of and because of those hardships no longer is on you, but on the Lord. When our weaknesses are readily apparent, and God does a mighty work, it means there's no explanation other than, "My grace is sufficient."

When we're faced by something we can't overcome on our own, the last thing we should do is hide it.

A few weeks ago, I was given a church newsletter from 25 years ago, in fact the special newsletter celebrating our church's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Been just a joy to read through it, and I'll be sharing more from it as we go along through this month.

But there was one little snippet that stood out to me this week. One article shared about the history of our Sunday School ministry, noting a long-term teacher named Ruth Pierce. Some of you no doubt remember Ruth Pierce. She began 25-year tenure teaching children's Sunday School *in 1952*. Think of the impact of such a ministry. Surely if anyone had a reason to boast, it was Ruth Pierce.

But when she asked about her ministry, she instead noted the challenges. I'll offer this one excerpt. "Although she insists the information is not for publication"—and this is in fact printed in that newsletter, so that didn't work—"Mrs. Pierce privately confesses to having been challenged in those days by the rowdy young triumvirate of Corky Willis, Pete Stiles, and Dent Davis [and this is my favorite part] now associate pastor at

Sequoyah Hills. ‘I walked into the classroom one day, and Pete was standing on the piano, and I said, “I can’t do this anymore.”’”

She could’ve said, everything is fine, or look how great things went, which would be justifiable given the impact she had made. But instead Ruth Pierce lifted up how she was pushed to the brink by children standing on pianos. And now, when we consider just how great the impact of that ministry has been, who is the focus on? Is it on Ruth Pierce and how wonderful and perfect she was, able to face any challenge without being shaken? Or is it on how by the all-sufficient grace of the Lord, God was at work in bringing about an amazing thing, even through the weaknesses and challenges we faced along the way?

So ask yourself this week. What in your life, what hardship, what challenges, what weaknesses, as serious as they are, what could be a sign of the all-sufficient grace of God? Doesn’t mean we can’t or shouldn’t lament them. Doesn’t mean we can’t or shouldn’t seek to overcome them. But let’s not hide them. Let’s lift them up, so that the power of Christ may dwell among us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.