

## Bragging Rights

Gene McAfee  
Faith United Church of Christ  
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Reformation-Reconciliation Sunday  
Stewardship Pledge Sunday  
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Isaiah 1:10-20; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4; Luke 19:1-10

“Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.” – 1 Thessalonians 1:4

Most of us, I imagine, were taught as children not to brag, and boasting, the key word in today's text, sounds enough like bragging that we don't do that, either. Bragging or boasting was considered immodest in the first place, and risky in the second, because we level-headed, no-nonsense Midwesterners have a congenital mistrust of good fortune. As soon as things seem to be going well, we begin to get a little uneasy, wondering how long it's going to last. I think I've told you of the mother of a friend of mine who'd come out on her front porch on a gloriously beautiful day, survey the beautiful world from horizon to horizon, nod her head affirmatively and then say, with a certain grim satisfaction, “Yes, yes. We're going to pay for this.”

We don't boast of beautiful weather because we know it won't last. We don't boast of our shrewd investments because we know that markets crash. We don't boast of our smart, intelligent, well-behaved children because we know how quickly and bitterly they can disappoint us. Most of us with a reasonable amount of common sense and experience know not to crow about our successes or the successes of others, and we tend, rather, to keep our heads down, our opinions to ourselves, and go through life very modestly. Most of us would agree that what Winston Churchill is supposed to have said about Clement Atlee would apply to us, as well: “A modest man, but then he has so much to be modest about.”

So when Paul, or someone writing in Paul's name, says of the church at Thessalonica, “Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring,” one wants to know more about that boasting. Paul must've been awfully proud of that church to go around telling other churches about it, especially since we know how prickly people can get when they hear someone else being held up as an example. It's always a little risky to boast, so Paul was out on a limb, and you wonder why.

We don't know much about the church at Thessalonica. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy founded it around the year 50 or so, and it was made up of Greek pagans, rather than Jews, who had become Christian. There was opposition to this new-fangled cult called Christianity, and both letters to the Thessalonians in the New Testament urge those early Christians not to become discouraged.

And apparently they didn't, which is why Paul boasted of them among the other churches. We don't know the details, but we're told in this second letter that the faith in the church is growing and their love for one another was increasing, and for Paul that was reason enough to boast, because when you come right down to it, what else does a church have except its faith and its love?

And that's why I boast of you among the churches of God around these parts. You are the church; I'm merely the pastor, and if there's any boasting to be done, it's not about me, it's about you. Not because you're perfect – you're not – nor because you're even what you should be – we've still got plenty of work to do – but rather because I see your faith in God growing and your love for one another and the world around you increasing, day by day, and that gives me, I believe, bragging

rights. I have every right to boast about you.

Now just so you know, I rarely exercise those rights. I would, after all, like to keep the friends I've made among my professional peers, so I try to keep a bridle on my tongue and not tell my colleagues, at every opportunity, everything I know about the ways you're working out your faith and love.

I don't, for example, boast too much about the several ways we're pursuing justice and mercy at the same time in this church. We know that feeding the hungry at our doorstep is important – Kathy and her crew served a Loaves and Fishes meal to the homeless downtown last Friday – but we also know that urging our leaders to pass legislation to help break the cycle of global poverty and hunger is also important, and so we send letters to our representatives in Congress, and we provide a venue for Fair Trade products.

I don't boast – too much – about the several programs for adult Faith Formation that have been developing here for the past several years, programs of Bible study, contemplative living, faith practices, the Lay School of the Church, and studying the works of progressive Christian thinkers. In this respect, we're recovering one of the important features of the earliest church, which didn't have a Sunday School; New Testament Christianity was aimed at making believers of adults, and its teachings were packaged for adults. We're realizing, as cultural Christianity continues to decline, that this is one of the important facets of our history we need to recover, and one of the important ways we need to be a teaching church in the future. We've known this for years in this church and we've been doing it. Do I boast about it? You bet I do!

I don't boast – too much – about the turnaround in this church's financial condition which, just a few years ago, was so dire we were looking at closing up shop. We're back on solid financial footing again, and that's because of your steadfast faith in God and your love for this community of God's people and what it can contribute to God's world. That's what makes a church financially healthy.

I don't boast – too much – about this church's modeling of behavior for other churches in the ONA process or intergenerational learning or supporting the arts, our local schools, and the preservation and exercise of our freedom as citizens.

If I wanted to boast of this church among the churches of God, I'd have plenty to talk about. This church – your church, YOU – have given me bragging rights, and on this day when we celebrate our Reformation heritage and our support of this church, I believe you needed to know that.

You need to know that you are a successful – and in many ways, exemplary – church. You need to know that you are modeling behavior that other churches notice and ask to know more about. You need to know that your potential for growth – spiritual and physical – is limited only by your hesitancy and neglect. You need to know all of that.

Every Lord's Day is a day to celebrate, and today we celebrate not only God's call to us in the undying love we see in Jesus' resurrection, but we also celebrate our history of reforming the church. In the UCC we call this Sunday Reformation-Reconciliation Sunday, a double-barreled name to remind ourselves that the work of reformation always goes hand-in-hand with the work of reconciliation. We decorate the church in red – one of the three occasions in a church's life when red is the liturgical color, the other two being Pentecost and ordination to the ministry – because red is the color not only of the blood that has been shed in our struggles with each other, but also because red is the color of the Holy Spirit, that presence of God that is able to make all things new, including and especially us.

The Holy Spirit refuses to let us believe that conflict, brokenness, and division will be the last words the world pronounces on the church. The UCC takes as its motto Jesus' prayer this his disciples may be one, and we reach out to all our Christian neighbors to hold up and hold onto those loves that bind us together in Christ. We don't ignore the differences, and we don't pretend they don't matter, but we know that we are more than our differences, and our denomination and our congregation refuse to be defined by our differences. Karen Wagner, our new Director of Christian Education for Faith Formation, is a wonderful role model for us, having worked to develop the faith of Christians in a variety of both Protestant and Roman Catholic settings. You all have seen Karen at work now for a couple of months, and I can tell you categorically that she's one more reason I boast of this church among the churches of God.

So we celebrate this church's participation in the work of reconciling Christians to one another, to God, to those who do not share our faith, and also to God's creation, trying to overcome centuries of estrangement between humans and the other members of creation, and Barb's steadfast faith in our potential to be more faithful stewards of God's precious creation is a treasure we should never take for granted. Do I boast of that treasure? You bet I do!

My friends, in this season of so much negative politicking, when we're bombarded with messages that attempt to tear down, rather than build up, when our attention is directed, over and over again, on the real and manufactured failures of others, when we're implicitly and sometimes explicitly told to live in a perpetual state of crisis – in the midst of all that, take a moment to celebrate this church and everything it represents. Take a moment to boast – quietly if you like, loudly if you prefer, but not obnoxiously if you can avoid it – of all that God has given this community of faith through all of you, through me, and through those who bequeathed this treasure to us.

Take a moment to think of all the reasons we have for bragging rights as we continue to grow in faith and love, never denying our need for growth and improvement, but also never undermining our own confidence in the gospel's power to work wonders. And as you pledge your support of this church in a few minutes, let your pledge be not only a sign of your sense of duty, but also, and more important, your sense of joy. Joy in this place and its many works, joy in your ability to give to and receive from it, and joy in the love of God that makes it all possible.

“Therefore, we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God.”