

“Boast in the Lord” 1 Corinthians 1:18–31 Epiphany 4A, January 29, 2017

So what do you do with a to do list? You know, things like clean the bathrooms, file the paper work, wash the car, do the grocery shopping, mend a fence, or build one, along with other small items like fix illegal immigration, health care, and the trade deficit? Conventional wisdom says we make a plan, gather our resources and materials, roll up our sleeves and go at it. When we are done, we have that satisfied sense of accomplishment. It doesn't matter if you are running a household or the White House, a classroom or a corporation, it takes planning and effort to see to the needs of your family, employees or clients. We know what has to be done, and we do it.

But what about God's to-do list like those in our readings today? God calls for them to do what is right, speak truth, do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with their God. David asks, who will dwell on God's holy hill, a symbol of the presence of God. Micah calls on the mountains to testify against the failures of God's people to do what is required. He has already given them much kindness and mercy. In return they seek to please God with sacrifices with no inclination to extend that mercy to others.

The Corinthian Church, instead of walking humbly, boasted about their divisions in the church, used their freedom in the Gospel as a license to sin, and flaunted their spiritual gifts as if they were for their own benefit. Paul, on the other hand, saw little reason for boasting in himself. In Romans 7 he confesses that he did the evil he should not do and he neglected to do the good he should do. His answer was not to cover his guilt with boasting in himself, but to take it to Christ the Crucified.

That was not the default path for the Jews and Gentiles in Paul's day. Jews sought security in the law. But they majored in minor regulations they had added to God's law, while neglecting the major law of mercy and kindness.

Today people look for a legal standard as proof that they are technically OK with God. They put confidence in the manmade traditions and rules of their religion. Yet they ignore the weightier matters that Micah and David to-do list. They take offense if someone calls them out on their disobedient heart and loveless attitude toward others.

But there is also a sinful pride disguised as humility, of which we may be guilty at times. You say *amen* to the Absolution, the Good News that in Christ you are fully and freely forgiven. But your heart speaks doubt to you, “But not my sin, Pastor. It is too great. I am too humble to think that God forgives that one.” But that is boasting of your humility, not in the power of the cross.

On the other hand, Gentiles seek wisdom. They are the irreligious, a growing number today. They see no need for a savior, for they are their own law. They may pay lip service to the law of God, but will re-interpret it, dilute it, reduce it to what is reasonable to them, insert exceptions and conditions, and generally rob it of its divine essence. After all, are they not wise? Don't they know better than God?

We don't do that, do we? Not until it comes to our pet sin, which is easier to justify than to repent. We are quite creative in accepting what we know is contrary to God Word. We think we are the exception to the rule. Hey, get in line. The world has been doing that ever since Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. You and I are not the exception.

To ascend that holy hill, the presence of God, we first need to ascend another holy hill, Calvary. There we see the sign both Jew and Gentile needs to know of God's great wisdom and power. There we see what the lawless call foolish and the legalists call scandalous.

There we find Christ crucified, who did God's to-do list for us. He did justice by being the due punishment for sin. He loved kindness by showing God's mercy in taking our place. He walked so humbly with God that he laid down His life as the ransom to redeem us from sin, death and the power of the devil.

Because He rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, sent us His Holy Spirit through the water and Word of Holy Baptism, we are called and equipped to do his “to-do” list. Only with Christ crucified in us can we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Only in Christ can we live the blessed life Jesus describes in today's Beatitudes. For they are not things we accomplish, but blessings of walking humbly before our God.

Even the wisest among us would have never considered such a wonderful plan of salvation. The most holy of us would not have dreamed that we needed it. As Isaiah wrote centuries before Christ, “My ways are not your ways, and my thoughts are not your thoughts.” Thank God for that. Now we don't have to depend on ourselves to get up that hill. By ourselves we cannot get there. So we confess and believe Christ crucified. In him alone we boast. Amen.