

NOT TO BRAG

May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! Gal 6:14-18

In today's reading, the Apostle Paul's authority is again being challenged, and Paul again shows us the Christian way to deal with such challenges. Don't react, don't tear others down, don't puff yourself up. As he puts it; "may I never boast of anything except the cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ." Boasting is one of those things that we all do, but is so close to us we have a hard time seeing it and the damage it can do. But it's easy to see in others. A new kid in Narek's basketball league was bragging about what a great player he was. Coach put him in the game, he ran without dribbling and took a shot which literally went over the entire backboard. Kids are very transparent, so we can learn much from them. This boy was feeling insecure about playing basketball, so he boasted to get approval from others that he couldn't give himself.

We adults do this all the time, we are just more sophisticated in hiding it. We hide boasting behind a complaint; 'Ugh, we have had so many weddings this year in church, it's hard to keep up.' We hide boasting behind humility; 'Honored and humbled to be invited to Etchmiadzin to receive the Nerses Shnorhali award from His Holiness.' Ok the second one isn't true, but the point is as we get older we learn to hide our bragging better, but still we brag and hide our vulnerabilities in so many ways. We like to make it look like our kids are perfect, that we have it all together and we always know what we're doing. The problem is this; that the more we mask and puff up who we are, the less connected we become to those around us, because love and connection takes authenticity and vulnerability. Our bragging can even disconnect us from God and ruin our prayer. Remember the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, and how the Pharisee brags before God. 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' This Pharisee's example of how not to be in prayer; boasting, self-righteous and judgmental, is sadly still a relevant and powerful warning today.

The positive example of where we want to be for a life well lived, marked with authentic love is provided by the tax collector whose prayer is short, contrite and stripped of pretense, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner!' As with all spiritual practices, this seems easy enough to say, but it is a lifelong discipline to have it seep into our hearts. That's because the problem of bragging isn't just overcompensating for our worldly insecurities, our status, honors and achievements, it is overcompensating for an insecurity rooted in our very souls. We humans have always wanted to be gods rather than worship God, and therein lies the source of all our woes. Our minds, hearts and souls are split and constantly in tension. Our false self tells us we are gods, we are entitled to more, and can never be filled. Our true self, the deepest part of who we are, knows that we are dependent on God and his love for who we are and who we are called to be.

For this reason, Paul reminds us in today's epistle reading that there is only one thing in which we are right to boast, and that is in the cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ. That's because the cross is our daily reminder that your false self, my false self, must constantly be crucified, it must be sacrificed to achieve new life. It will never be satisfied, no matter how much we might try to appease it. It will go on bragging, comparing, judging and condemning because that is its nature. This I think is the meaning behind one of Jesus' seemingly harshest statements. "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." (Jn 12:25) This isn't about hating life itself which is a gift from God, it is about hating our false self and ego, putting it in its place. Because if we can daily sacrifice this false self, Paul joyously reminds us that a new self will be offered in its place, a new creation which is everything.

That's why Jesus, unlike the founder of any other religion, does not encourage any form of sacrifice, except the sacrifice of the ego, the false self. "The sacrifice pleasing to God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart." His cross is the mysterious means of healing for all of mankind because it shows us not to hide, deny or run away from our own insecurity, brokenness and vulnerability. Where the world shuns the weak and vulnerable, the cross was God using the door of vulnerability to enter the world. God is vulnerable because God is love, and following Jesus, all of us who decide to truly love know that this makes us vulnerable as well. But it also opens us up to the mighty power of the cross, the power of a new creation. So then let us finish by joining Paul in the same pledge with which we began and letting it sink

into our daily lives, our very souls; “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything,” now and always; amen.