



## Boasting

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Mark 6:1-13

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In August, 1916, my mother was born at Old Forge, New York, in the house my grandfather built. In her childhood, Old Forge was very remote; the road to Booneville, the nearest real town (Mom always insisted that Old Forge wasn't a town or a village, but a *hamlet*) was about twenty-five dirt miles away.

The climate is cold and wet, and the soil is very poor. Even though you can't grow much, when you're that isolated, up in the mountains and out of the way, you produce what you can for yourself. Despite the short growing season and the rocky, acidic soil, there were some things they could wrest from the land, one of them being maple syrup.

Every spring, the locals would drill holes and hook up pails to the sugar maples to collect sap (I did it, too, using some of the same taps my grandfather did). You have to collect forty-three gallons of sap for one gallon of syrup, meaning you've got a lot of careful boiling to do. And from the syrup, you can get sugar – wonderful, flavorful sugar, sugar I always found a bit too sweet – which they used, along with syrup, for almost everything, since cane sugar was scarce and very expensive. (Now here in GV, syrup is nearly a dollar an ounce; and since you just can't get it, the sugar is beyond price).

Still, because this bounty was commonplace, it was cane sugar that was a delicacy. On the extremely rare occasions when they got the chance, travelling, my mom and her sisters would eat spoonfuls from the sugar bowl.

And here's the best part: they *begged* my grandmother to get them Karo syrup for their pancakes.

Mary Lou Retton is from Fairmont, West Virginia, and her Olympic stardom happened while I lived there. Until the games actually began, just about the only person in town who said anything about her was the priest of her Catholic parish. To everyone else, she was just another local kid – maybe a bit too big for her britches, though that's hard to imagine, seeing as she wasn't yet much over four feet tall at the time. No one

believed the hype about her talent until she tumbled, somersaulted, and skyrocketed to gymnastic stardom.

Stories about amazing things seem always to be about a guy that's a cousin of someone I met in the Atlanta airport, don't they? We tend to sit back and think more critically about the account of someone we've known for years saying that yes, it was I who picked up the alien bodies at Roswell.

And that's what happens to Jesus back in Nazareth. People have come out to hear the home-town boy made good, but then when he talks to them the way he talks to everyone else, they start to remember way back when. "Who does he think he is? I remember when he used to crawl around in the dirt in front of their house. How dare he try to tell me about God! How dare he talk to ME like that!" And this undercuts his effectiveness. The work that Jesus was doing at this stage of his ministry had a lot to do with raw faith, like the woman we encounter in the previous chapter, who was healed just by touching his robe – at least partly because she *believed* that would happen. Jesus was a stranger to her, a powerful teacher – *from somewhere else*.

These stories about Jesus are exotic to us, too. He's a man we've never met face to face, a legend. But here, in our plain, ordinary lives, things are much different, aren't they? The mighty deeds of power, the miracles, the incredible stories of hearts touched and lives changed, these are about someone else, aren't they?

Well, no. The truth of the Gospel is that there are miracles sitting in the same pew with you. There are, next to you,, stories that would curl your hair, stories that could warm your heart, stories of faith and life and God that should make us all stand up and shout "Glory to God"! We've been listening a bit too carefully to what Paul's talking about to the Corinthians. He's telling them not to get in big bragging contests over what God's been doing in their lives, and so then he brings out some of his own experiences, along with all these people who've done and seen so much – more even than Paul, or at least so he says (there's some pretty elaborate modesty going on there).

Paul was a stupendous figure, by any standard. He needed help keeping a justifiably big ego in check, and so was given a reminder of his frailty, his dependence not on himself but on Christ, in his famous "thorn in his side." We, however, have a somewhat different problem. We seem to have been given the thorn of familiarity, the ability to make the exceptional ordinary, the miraculous common-place.

Even regarding our nation. As Americans, no matter how great our pride, we have become used to our freedom, our vast distances, our prosperity. All too often, we take these and other things for granted, despite the hoopla of July Fourth. We're so used to open space, great distances, the habit of setting our own schedules, of convenience, that we forget the millions of people who would like to experience for a day, an hour, things that we don't even notice; parts of our history heroic beyond belief that we've never heard; sacrifices unsung and forgotten, but that make it possible for us to sit here today.

But to return to my point: humans have a tendency to allow familiarity to take the bright edge off wonderful things and wonderful people. Right next to you sits a miracle,

someone whom God loves and has brought to this place and time, someone who doesn't even realize how special he or she is. Someone like you.

Mark says that Jesus was astounded at the disbelief of his neighbors, and that got in the way of his work among them. That's true in our lives, too. God is working in and among us, right this minute: life-changing decisions are being made, the Holy Spirit is moving and changing you and those around you, while we sit blissfully unaware of the drama coursing through this room.

Along with the drama we are about to celebrate. Here, in this familiar ritual of bread cubes and grape juice, it's easy to miss the moment, the spirit of God blowing up and down the aisles, the incredible power of the communion of saints gathering among us, as Jesus Christ joins us in the sacrament of this symbolic meal. But it is here – in this room, in this world which is truly Jesus' hometown.