

WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?  
I Corinthians 9: 1 – 27  
Proverbs 8: 1-11

The Ordination Sermon for  
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Calvary Baptist Church

“Hey, dummy, who do you think you are?” shouted the figure at the top of the hill.

At the time I was struggling, in the dark of night, to make my way up the long, snowy, steep hill upon which Colgate Rochester/Bexley Hall/Crozer Divinity School had been built decades before.

I had, by then, been president of the Rochester, New York school for six or seven years. And as winter approached each of those years, I had signed off on a policy prohibiting sledding on that hill, recognizing that if anyone got seriously hurt hurling down that steep slope, the rates on our insurance policy would surely spiral. So every winter we placed very prominent signs at the top of the hill that read something like: “Absolutely no sledding on this hill” and maybe we added, as well, “trespassers will be arrested.”

But whenever there was a newly fallen snow and the sledding conditions couldn't get any better, I was often tempted to get out one of my daughters' sleds and take a ride or two myself. I had always resisted ... until that snowy night when, after two or three slides down the hill, I heard that security guard yell: “Hey, dummy, who do you think you are?”

I struggled to the top of the hill to meet my prosecutor, shook off the snow from my coat and pants, removed my snow-packed stocking cap, and wiped the ice from my eyebrows and snow from the rest of my face.

It took just a second for the security officer to recognize who I was and then spurt out: “Oh my goodness, I had no idea it was you; I'm sorry, Mr. President.”

I immediately raised my hand and stopped him and said, no, no, he was doing exactly what he was supposed to do; he was doing precisely what he was being paid for.

And as he walked away back toward his guard post, I did have to ask myself the question: dummy, who do you think you are? – thinking you had the right to violate the rules that were to apply to everyone.

We know the type don't we? The type, that is, for whom the question “just who do you think you are?” applies. The one who assumes some stance or position or rank or standing that seems special, out of the ordinary, sometimes pretentious or beyond what should be the case.

Sometimes the question itself – just who do you think you are? – is enough to put the person in his or her rightful place – to burst that person's balloon, to set her straight, to get his act back together.

But sometimes, too, it is the occasion for that person to make her or his defense that, indeed, they know very well who they are and why they are taking the extraordinary steps or actions they are seen taking.

It's in that open sense of the question that we're here today to ask someone who grew up in this congregation, who has been a part of this church – with just a few interruptions – for years, whom we know well as a person of unusual talent and, yes, boldness, we ask Damon Jones, as he comes before us to be ordained, to be set apart for a special calling, to be marked for Christian ministry: Damon Renard Jones, who do you think you are?

Well, Damon Jones, you are in good company this morning, because that's the question the Corinthian church was asking the Apostle Paul – Paul of Tarsus, who do you think you are?

It was certainly not the case that Paul was a stranger to members of the church at Corinth – he was the founder, the creator, the starter of that church. It was Paul's early missionary efforts that had resulted in there being a church in that city at all! Paul, in short, could take great pride in what his earlier work had accomplished there – there could be legitimate reason for his “boasting” (a word, as you might recall, that Paul uses in our reading for this morning) about what he had done in Corinth. So when the Corinthians asked: “Paul, who do you think you are?” they weren't seeking biographical information, they weren't inquiring into his personality or character, they weren't asking him to fill out an application, they weren't questioning his abilities and talents! Those Corinthians – at least some of them – were questioning his authority, his standing, his right to guide and direct that church he had founded.

And that's because there had been important developments in the Corinthian church since Paul had created it – since, that is, Paul had been away creating other churches elsewhere.

First of all, unlike some of the other earlier churches that Paul had established – particularly the Galatian church – in which there was the assumption that Gentiles had to adopt the Jewish laws and customs if they were to be followers of Jesus, including male circumcision and the Jewish dietary laws – in Corinth it was just the opposite: in Corinth there developed a belief that converting to Christianity made one free of any and all laws (Jewish or Gentile). Accepting Christ as one's savior, that is, made one a “spiritual” person who possessed special “wisdom” (think of our reading from Proverbs this morning) and, therefore no need to follow any custom or moral law because “perfection” (along with immortality) had already been achieved.

So just as Paul had to write to the Galatian church to tell them “no,” the Gentile men there didn't have to be circumcised in order to be Christians, and “no,” the whole congregation didn't have to follow Jewish dietary laws, because in Christ they were free from the rigid laws of Judaism, now in writing to the church in Corinth he had to take the opposite position: that being a Christian didn't mean that “anything goes” in terms, particularly, of a sexual ethic or in the way one ate and took care of the body generally.

Second, and as a result of the so-called “Hellenistic” belief that Christian conversion led to both complete freedom and a kind of special wisdom and perfection on the part of the one converted, the Corinthian church became extremely divided and factionalized. One leading teacher or “evangelist” in the church would come up with a particular set of doctrines and collect a following around those beliefs, and another leading teacher/evangelist would come up with another set of doctrines and gather a different following, and on and on it went. It got so bad that when people were baptized,

they identified themselves with the leading teacher who baptized them rather than identifying themselves with Christ!

And to make things even more complicated, each of these leaders would expect payment or a salary for their ministries, and certain benefits, and certain rights – rights like having their spouses accompany them in their church work.

So you can see that the Corinthian church was in trouble, and why at least some members of the congregation appealed not just to what Paul had taught them at the beginning but now sought his counsel on how to get out of this mess that the church found itself in – even though the followers of Paul were now seen as just another faction in the church.

In fact, it was exactly this predicament – of Paul’s now questionable standing or authority in the Corinthian church – that was at stake when he wrote his first letter to the Corinthians. And it was his defense here in the ninth chapter of First Corinthians that he answered that crucial question of the day: “Paul, just who do you think you are?”

Paul’s response here in the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter was ingenious, but complicated. Since this sermon isn’t a part of a semester-long course on Paul’s teachings (1), I’ll try to boil his argument and tactics down to the essentials. You have to remember, however, that unlike most of his leading competitors in Corinth, Paul didn’t accept any money or salary for his ministry, but continued to work as a leatherworker in order to support himself and his ministry wherever he traveled, and that Paul wasn’t married and so had no spouse accompanied him. Yet it was on these issues some of his critics questioned his authority – his basis for claiming that he had any standing with the Corinthians: wasn’t he bound by customs that applied to other “authorities” in the Corinthian church?

So Paul begins his defense – and ultimately his case for the Gospel of Jesus Christ – by asking this church that so emphasized *freedom* whether he, Paul, was free as a leader in the church of Jesus Christ. Nice strategy right there at the very beginning: to attack the opponent on the very grounds that the opponent holds dear and central. “In Christ, as you Corinthians like to emphasize, I am free,” Paul is saying.

And then, if that isn’t enough, he goes on to ask: “Am I not an apostle, and doesn’t the fact that I am, give me standing?” That is, if being an “apostle” has to do with being called by Jesus himself in person, then don’t I, Paul, have apostolic authority insofar as I have seen the Lord, insofar as I have experienced the Lord directly, insofar as my conversion on the road to Damascus is based on being called by the Lord.

And if that isn’t enough, if you question that, if you want still more, how about this? – that you, the Corinthian church, are the result of my ministerial work! Doesn’t that count for something?

And if you say that I may not be an apostle to others, aren’t I an apostle at least to you here in Corinth, given our special relationship?

You ask who do I think I am. And I tell you I am Paul, free in Christ, free as an apostle of Christ, free as one who has directly seen and experienced Christ, free as I have shown myself effective in my ministry, and especially among you. You, of all people, are the seal, the confirmation, the proof of my being an apostle of Jesus Christ and my freedom as an apostle to preach and teach that Gospel of Jesus Christ.

That’s the beginning of Paul’s argument to the Corinthians.

But then he changes tactics. Rather than questioning or challenging his opponents and their rights as leaders, Paul affirms them and asks why he isn’t granted those same

rights and privileges. They have the right, that is, to eat and drink and live off the salary they receive for their ministry, so don't I have that same right, Paul asks? They – my challengers – have the right to be married and to take their spouse with them in their ministerial duties, so don't I have that same right. Or am I and my ministerial companions (in this case Barnabas), the only ones being denied these rights – unlike my colleague Peter back in Jerusalem, who is married, and even the brothers of Jesus, who also have families – am I and my ministerial companion the only ones whose freedom and rights are restricted?

Paul continues – being very much aware that he is being criticized for not accepting a salary and for sustaining himself in ministry by working his own trade – not by undermining his opponents right for accepting a ministerial salary but by affirming it, and goes to great lengths to justify this support according to both ordinary practice (like farmers eating the produce from their own fields or like oxen grinding the grain needing to feed on that grain for their strength or like soldiers not having to make a living on their own to serve in the armed forces) as well as how all this is justified in the Old Testament – that is, that priests at the temple are encouraged to live off the money contributed and to eat from the produce given there.

Paul is saying: I don't question those practices at all – they are, in fact, divinely ordained and permitted. My opponents have every right to benefit from those rights of living physically off what is contributed in return for their spiritual and ministerial work. But, Paul asks, why is it only me and my companion who are criticized for *not* exercising this right that is granted to everyone. Why is my freedom being restricted by you who place so much emphasis on freedom?

Do you see the ingenuity – indeed, the wisdom – in Paul's defense against his challengers in Corinth? Yes, I agree that in our conversion to follow Jesus we are liberated, we are free. But if we are truly free, authentically liberated, then we can make our own choices about whether to exercise the rights we are granted in our freedom and liberation. Just as you have the freedom, based on your rights, to take a salary from the church, and to have a spouse who accompanies you, and to eat and drink from what is contributed, so do I (and Barnabas) have the freedom, based on those same rights, not to take a salary, not to marry, and not to eat and drink from what is contributed – we have the freedom to work on our own to support our ministries, to be unmarried, to allow that is given to the church to be used by the church.

As Paul says in verse 15, "I have not made use of any of these." And he adds that he wants to be absolutely clear that this is not some devious way of securing a gift, or some support, or some underwriting of his ministry. In fact, he starts a sentence, "I would rather die than..." and doesn't finish the sentence. Just lets it hang there. But some have suspected that Paul was thinking that he would rather die than take gifts and support for himself that could be used by the church for its essential work, its critical ministries – but we simply don't know that. All he says, after that incomplete sentence is: "No one will make my boasting null and void!" And, again, we don't know whether that complete sentence refers to what he has just said and what he is going to say next. What we do know is that it is about "boasting" – what Paul can legitimately boast about and what he can't.

And here the argument changes radically. Now Paul isn't being ingenious, not playing with his opponents, not fulfilling the role as a logician or philosopher. Now Paul is being a proclaimer. Here's what he writes:

If I proclaim the gospel, that is not my boast. Constraint presses upon me. Woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel.

Now we are no longer talking the language of freedom and liberation. Now Paul is talking the language of confinement and restraint and restriction. Now we are talking about something Paul has no control over – whether as a human being, or a Roman citizen, or as a Jew, or as an apostle, or as a minister of Christ. And therefore Paul is talking about something he cannot boast about, since boasting only is justified by accomplishing something someone has done in one's freedom.

What is it that Paul has no control over? What is it that confines, and restrains, and restricts Paul? What is it that enslaves him?

It is, as we well know, his conversion and his calling.

It wasn't a matter of choice to be knocked off that beast of burden and confronted by the risen Lord. It wasn't his decision to change his life from being a persecutor of Christ's disciples into being the proclaimer of Christ as savior to the whole world. It wasn't up to Paul to preach the Gospel:

Woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel.

That is to say, my life, my being, my existing at all is under threat if I do not do proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord.

So there's no boasting here, Paul says. None whatsoever.

If I had some choice in the matter, if it were a matter of exercising my free will, then I could claim a reward for being a preacher of the gospel, a proclaimer of the Word. Then I could boast.

But if this isn't a matter of free will, if preaching and proclaiming Christ as Lord is something I have to do unwillingly, then it is strictly an assignment I go about, a task I take on, a directive I heed, a command I follow. Paul is saying he has become a slave, and indentured servant, a household steward to Christ and Christ's gospel, to Christ's good news.

Absolutely no boasting here!

So, Paul asks the Corinthians, what then is my reward? Where then is the grounds for my boasting?

Now watch this, watch how Paul connects this part of his argument to the first part. He says:

What then is my reward? That in preaching the gospel I make the gospel *free of charge*, not using the rights that are legitimately mine in proclaiming the gospel.

Now we are back to addressing the challengers in Corinth about the freedom and liberation that are based on rights.

Yes, yes, Paul is saying, you other ministers have the right and the freedom to be paid for your ministries, to be married, to make use of what is contributed to the church

for your own use – no question about that. And that same right and freedom applies to me and Barnabas, but in our freedom and liberation we choose not to use these things for our own benefit. And in that freedom I have something to boast about: I can offer the gospel free of charge to everyone, without being obligated to anyone for anything that I might have taken in support of my ministries.

And, Paul adds, look what that freedom, based in my enslavement to Christ and to proclaim him and his good news, allows me to do unencumbered: “I can make myself a servant of everyone so that I might win over even many more.

To the Jews, I can rightfully be a Jew, under the law, so I can win my fellow Jews to Christ.

To the Gentiles, I can rightfully be a Gentile, not under any law – except the law of Christ, the law of love – so I can win them to Christ.

To the weak, I can rightfully be weak, so that I can win over the weak.

And Paul could have added, that he could be strong, so that he could win over the strong.

And, finally, in a burst of affirmation of his freedom based in his enslavement to Christ, Paul says:

To all people everywhere and in every condition I have become all things so that I might surely save some. And all these things I do for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in it.

Hey, Paul of Tarsus, who do you think you are ?

I am Paul, once Saul, converted and called by Jesus Christ to preach and proclaim the Gospel of God – which is foolishness to the worldly wise, a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles, Christ humiliated and crucified, but actually the Wisdom and Power of God – I am Paul, converted and called by that Jesus Christ, and thereby enslaved and in bondage to him, in order to be free to share that gospel, that good news, freely with everyone, so they too might become slaves, servants, and stewards and therein find their true liberation in a kingdom, a community, a matrix, a domain of love, of mutual care and compassion, of justice and peace, that finds its source and its sustenance in the outrageously abundant love of God.

Woe is me, if I become something other than that, for that is my God-given life in Christ Jesus.

Damon Renard Jones, who do you think you are?