

**Year C, Pentecost 6, Proper 8**

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**Galatians 5:1-25**

### **Can You Reject Harp Music and Still Be Christian?**

Last week I went to the hospital to visit Bob Sleight, an old farmer and delightfully crusty character we all know and love. On the day he was admitted a woman with this huge harp came by and offered to play some music for him. He respectfully declined. The next day she came again, dragging this heavy instrument to his door and again asked. He again politely said no and this time offered more explanation. He said he didn't like harp music and then added that where he was going they don't have harps. She got the message and left.

The next time I came to visit Bob, Sue and their son Bob Jr. were there. They couldn't wait to tell me this story and we all laughed heartily. The laughter was freeing and wellness-making. Fears disappeared from the room and a sense of wholeness and grace took possession of our shared space. This was not "old time religion," it was the presence of the new kingdom Jesus is bringing.

Their humor told me volumes about their theology and that Christ had set them free from worrying about whether they were "in" or "out." They knew they were "in" because there is no "out." That's the message of Jesus that Paul is trying to get his friends in Galatia to see. There is no "in" and "out" because Jesus has shown us that all are children of God, even though we all conspired to get rid of Jesus, the boundary buster.

The problem Paul has encountered in Galatia was that after Paul left them some "religious folk" came and told the Galatians that they weren't religious enough. They needed to try harder to be religious. They needed to get circumcised, eat the right foods, and keep Sabbath rigorously to show other people and God that they meant business. If they didn't do these things they weren't real Christians.

It would be like saying to Bob that he should listen to the harp music and take it seriously even though he didn't like it, and his not liking it only showed that he wasn't a real Christian and he ought to be ashamed of himself and learn to like it. When we all laughed that's what we were throwing off. We were saying to each other and Bob, "stand firm and don't submit to the bondage of slavery again."

Now I want to paraphrase the next section of Paul's arguments against being religious. I am using religion here to mean feeling you have to do certain things to be in with God and other religious persons and if you don't do those things you are out, not a true follower of Christ, and damned for all time. I concede that refusing harp music is at a different level than refusing adult circumcision but I think the principle is the same and it's the principle that Paul was getting at. We didn't read the middle section of Galatians 5 this morning as our lectionary text skips it but I am going to read it to you anyway.

Paul writes, *“Look, I, Paul, am telling you that if you have yourselves circumcised, having Christ won’t help you.”* If you decide to force yourself to listen to harp music even though you don’t like it and can’t see the point of it; being a follower of Jesus won’t help you. We aren’t made right with God because we like harp music, we are made right with God because God loves us and Jesus has shown us this in his life, death, forgiveness and resurrection. Furthermore, this isn’t a personal thing for us alone, it’s for all humans—an event has happened that gives us new and updated information about a love so deep it encompasses the whole human race.

Paul knows the Galatians are new to this understanding of the universe and some people who claim authority from Jerusalem, the mother church, have come and filled them with fear. The false teachers have been saying that Paul was wrong and dangerous for telling them they are free, that they could live without fear for the first time in their lives, so Paul says it again. *“Again I swear to every man who has himself circumcised that he is required to do the whole Law.”* Having to do religious things rather than depending on Christ is a slippery slope because it’s not built on trust and relationship, love and grace, daddy-dependence and mother-embrace; it’s built on trying to be good rather than trusting in God. Here is how Paul puts it: *“You people who are trying to be made righteous by the Law have been estranged from Christ. You have fallen away from grace! We eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness through the Spirit by faith.”*

The minute you feel you have to make yourself “good” by listening to harp music you distrust your relationship with Jesus and that will cause you to feel separate from him. You will drop out of that hope of already being right with God through the Spirit by the faith of Jesus. You’re living in a different space then and its one where you feel you must do things to stay in it.

Now here is where we have misunderstood Paul for a long time. Paul’s next sentence is going to jerk us out of some bad theology that actually paved the way for the holocaust in Germany. *“Being circumcised or not being circumcised doesn’t matter in Christ Jesus, but faith working through love does matter.”* You can be circumcised and you can be uncircumcised and still be “in” with God because is not about “in” and “out.” There is only “in” and that’s the good news and the freedom Paul is afraid they are going to abandon. Somehow in history this got interpreted as uncircumcised Christians were “in” and circumcised Jews were not—another “in” and “out” scheme that got used to create that horrible separation between Jews and Christians that lead to the scapegoating and extermination of eight million Jews. Theology is important! Now we see that Paul actually had the opposite view from how we had interpreted him.

This is threatening to get too long, but I must read Paul’s next paragraph using the Modern English Version of the Bible and I am going to make some comments as I read it.

*You were running well—who stopped you from obeying the truth?* (The truth that God loves all people and there is no “in” and “out.”) *This line of reasoning doesn’t come from the one who calls you.* (The one who called them is God through Jesus.) *A little yeast works through the whole lump of dough.* (The yeast refers to the fear that these false teachers are spreading among the people and the impact it’s having on them.) *I’m convinced about you in the Lord that you won’t think any other way. But the one who is confusing you will pay the penalty, whoever*

*that may be.* (Paul expresses confidence that they will be able to figure this out. The penalty that those who are confusing them will pay is living with the fear themselves that they are attempting to generate in the Galatian people. They will feel compelled to listen to Harp music and like it, lest they be excluded from that place where harps are always present. Paul is not threatening damnation for he doesn't believe in it.)

The next sentence will surprise you for Paul himself sounds like a crusty old farmer. He says, "*I wish that the ones who are upsetting you would castrate themselves.*" Yes, he said that! Maybe that's why the lectionary people decided to skip this section; it's painful to hear, particularly for men.

Now we run smack into the section we did read this morning. "*You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love.*"

I made a point all along to stress that Bob was very respectful in his dialogue with the harp lady. He was clear with her each time. He didn't accuse her of being pushy, nor did he order her out of the room, he used gentile humor that made himself the butt of his joke when he said where he was going they didn't have harps. There was no violence in his response except to say that if anyone was going to hell it was him, and since he knew he wasn't, there wasn't any violence toward him either. I think Paul would agree with me that it was a brilliant response.

But what if in his freedom Bob had gotten snotty; arrogantly or angrily called the woman a hypocrite or a religious fanatic and ordered her out of his room? If he had done that he would have been indulging his selfish impulses by putting her down so as to raise himself up. That's that same old I'm "in" because I have just scored on you by showing that you are "out." If he had done that he would be serving himself at her expense. And believe me, it must have been tempting but it wouldn't be serving each other through love.

Maybe for Bob it is an old and gentile habit, acquired through many years of trying to love your neighbor as yourself, but at some point, or maybe through trials and failures, Bob learned to discipline his impulses. Or maybe, like most of us, he's still learning and this was a crowning achievement in that process.

Paul sums it up when he, in essence says, if you want to be in good with God and your neighbor, don't do it by trying to be good so as to gain an advantage with God, you don't need to do that, its wasted effort that gets in your own way; just love your neighbor as yourself. And remember "*If you bite and devour each other, (like Bob could have done but didn't) be careful that you don't get eaten up by each other.*" It seems to me we have a lot of biting and devouring of each other going on politically these days.

I want to end by reading the last two verses from this inspired section from Paul's letter to the Galatians. He writes, "*Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the self with its passions and its desires. If we live by the Spirit, let's follow the Spirit. Let's not become arrogant, make each other angry, or be jealous of each other.*" Amen.