

Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered...Not

Galatians 3:1-9, 23-29

Northminster Presbyterian Church

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Twenty five years ago this month, I taught my first Legal Continuing Education event. I used to be part of a team teaching updates in the law to people who needed continuing education credits to keep their licenses active. But it wasn't what I was teaching this month all of those years ago that I remembered when I first read this text again; it's what happened the night after. The seminar was in Dallas at the end of a week and I decided to stay for the weekend for a little break.

That Friday night I went to a cabaret concert put on by the Dallas Symphony, and the singer was Lena Horne. She was 76 years old and she had us in the palm of her hand for almost two hours, particularly in the second half when she sent most of the orchestra away and continued with just a five piece band. Her signature songs were all during this set and as much as I loved Stormy Weather, her version of Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered was heart shattering.

She sang it in a way I hadn't ever heard it before or since. She sang it so that that you knew she was in love, deeply in love. But she also knew it wasn't a good thing. The message of the song in her bittersweet rendition was that there are some people we aren't meant to give our hearts and souls to because they will trample on them. Some kinds of love are destructive or codependent in the words of therapy — love that doesn't feed but consumes.

Bewitched is a good way of describing that kind of love. It's a powerful metaphor, to be under a spell, or, in one of the other ways the word is often used, seduced.

It's in that way that Paul is using it today. He sees the people falling in love with a certain way of being church — a certain way of being Christian — and he knows it's very bad for them. They have fallen into report-card Christianity. They want to make sure that they — and perhaps more importantly, everyone else — are doing it the right way, are being "good" Christians. And so they've turned to the law, the Law of Moses, the biggest list of dos and don'ts they can find. And, after all, it's a list that was considered God's gift to the Hebrew people 1000 or so years before. So surely it's the best way to make sure everyone is doing things the way they should, right?

But Paul sees this for what it is. It's a rejection of the grace of Jesus Christ. If they can succeed, if they can be faithful people just by following the rules, then why on earth did Jesus have to come down in the first place? Why are his death and resurrection important if we can just pull out the rule book and make everything okay?

Well, I can almost hear the people respond. How are we to measure success, Paul? After all, we are a people who need standards. We need to make sure that our kids

get tested within an inch of their lives to see if our schools are okay. We have drivers' tests and entrance exams for doctors and lawyers and dentists and teachers and federal employees. And this is how we do it. We have to be able to quantify, to rank, to say who is better, who is best, and who isn't measuring up.

As we talked about last week, this all started with circumcision. When someone from the Jerusalem leadership told the people that faith wasn't enough, that they had to complete what they had begun by observing Mosaic law — become circumcised, celebrate the Jewish festivals, observe the kosher food laws — and follow the Law of Moses to the letter. And they said, you can't be a good Christian unless you do what Abraham did.

So Paul is angry; and who can blame him? These new teachers caused a real crisis. His message to the Gentiles of salvation by the grace of Christ through the gift of faith was being muddied by these competing teachers who seem to be linking salvation with keeping the law. Here, Paul is struggling to honor the Law and the role it plays in God's promises to the Hebrew people, the heirs of Abraham. He also wants to make sure that these new Christians understand that it was not the law that saved the Hebrew people — it was God's covenant. It is not the law that will save them; it is the faith of Jesus Christ.

How does he do that? By making reference to the same promises those other teachers did — God's promises to Abraham and Sarah. They talk about Abraham when he says to remember what God said way back then in the Covenant with Abraham. The promise was not just that Abraham and his family would be blessed, but that through them, all the nations would be blessed. We need to remember that "nations" is translated in the Greek versions of the old testament with the same word used for Gentiles, people like you Galatians. In Jesus Christ, you are a fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. And so, you Gentiles, in what should you put your trust? In Christ.

That's what I think Paul means when he says that faith came with Jesus. It's not that the Hebrew people didn't have faith, but that the Gentile Christians have a different kind of faith.

The Hebrew people were raised in a tradition where life was defined and ordered by God's covenant with their ancestors, a covenant that included the gift of the law. And now these new folks, non-Hebrew followers of Christ, are defined by grace which includes the gift of faith.

But, Michael, you may say, you've been talking about this for three weeks. We get it. What's new here?

Well, back to Lena Horne. This month something else interesting happened on the internet, AGAIN. Lena Horne died in May of 2010. But almost every May since then, someone on the internet gets it wrong. They see someone posting a memory of her passing and spread it around the internet that she has died. It happened again just a couple of weeks ago. People posted pictures and talked about how

much they loved her movies and music, how she was a pioneer as the first African American woman to get a studio contract. All of these are accolades she clearly deserved. But all were saying, "so sad she died today."

They were seduced by something they wanted to be right. It felt good to be nostalgic about such a great artist. It felt good to jump on the "we love Lena" bandwagon. It felt good to celebrate her long life. It was all well intentioned and all heartfelt, but it was all wrong. There was no need for fresh grief; there was no need for the pang of loss. We'd lost Ms. Horne years before. There was a lot of angst and melancholy and sadness for no real reason.

So yes, Ms. Horne is already well settled in the heavenly chorus. She doesn't need our tears or pain or sadness. And Paul says our salvation is well settled. We need not beat ourselves up with fear and grief over whether we are good enough. And besides, we have fresh news enough to mourn.

We mourn particularly the children murdered this week in terrorist attacks in a public square in Manchester and on a pilgrimage bus for Coptic Christians in Egypt. We see the evil that comes when identity becomes the basis of exclusion and enmity. We see the danger of wrapping one's identity up in ideologues of dominance, destruction or prejudice. Paul saw the seeds of division in Galatia as potentially being that dangerous — for communities and for individual souls.

And we mourn the fact that white men in this country, call them terrorists for consistency, murdered three people. On the campus of the University of Maryland, Sean Urbanski approached Second Lt. Richard Collins III and two of his friends standing on a sidewalk. He demanded that the three African-Americans "step left if you know what's good for you." When Lt. Collins objected, Mr. Urbanski stabbed him fatally.

This weekend, on a commuter train in Portland, Oregon, a known white supremacist Jeremy Christian stabbed three men who intervened when he was harassing two young women who were dressed in traditional Muslim clothing. Taliesen Namkai-Meche, an intern with a consulting firm, and Ricky Best, a retired marine and city employee with four school aged children, died. Micah Fletcher, a student, is in the hospital still.

It appears both of these violent racists were seduced by the idea that the color of their skin and their Christian heritage made them more than someone else, gave them the right to lord their status over others they deemed inferior. Richard and Taliesen and Ricky are heroes we mourn this day. But I want to suggest that we should mourn Jeremy and Sean as well, though they are still alive — even as we pray for justice and mercy to be done — because they have been poisoned by a poison similar to the one Paul feared.

Our salvation is already well settled in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He doesn't need us to enslave ourselves to a checklist. But more to the point, we must not be seduced by allegiance to any status other than the one given to us by

Jesus — that we are one of the billions of those for whom Christ lived, died and rose. There is nothing we can DO to earn the status of beloved — not by getting all A's on the piety report card and not by being some twisted concept of pure white Christians.

We are invited to give thanks for the gift of faith, a word in the Greek probably best translated in contemporary language as trust. We are invited to place our trust in Christ.

Our faith then becomes, as Canadian Theologian Douglas John Hall says, a relationship with God where God has become present in such a way that we trust God. In the act of trusting someone, you go beyond what you know of him or her. Trust involves decision and risk. And the decision is not just once and for all; it has to be renewed regularly if it is to be authentic.

So faith becomes response-in-relationship; it is an ongoing thing, a process. We can never say that we 'have' it, as if it were a possession. We Protestants affirm that faith is 'a gift.' But, as Hall reminds us, that statement is misleading if it implies that the 'gift' is something we can hold easily in the palm of our hands. "Faith," he says, "is like the manna of the wilderness or the 'daily bread'" of the Lords' prayer. It is a gift that is renewed every day, indeed every moment. It is a gift we sometimes have to work to accept—those times when the decision and risk of trusting God becomes real.

And that means that, because grace is free but faith is something we sometimes stumble with, it is a place where we can be gentle with one another, where each of us can carry one another through the struggles with doubt and trust.

It is bewitching to imagine that if we just do it all the right way, if we just figure out the formula, we'll know when we're doing what God wants. And it's seductive to look to ancient lists of rules and say that's how we do it. But that's not freedom; that's slavery. And we are free. The fact that faith is a gift given new each day, THAT is freedom, freedom from the shame prison of having to do the right thing all the time, freedom from worry over the state of our souls, and ultimately, freedom to trust — to trust in the God of creation who made us, to trust in the God of grace who has conquered sin and death for our sake, to trust in the God of faith, who is as close as breath, as trustworthy as the rising of the sun each morning. We have freedom to face each day, not with dread, but with the hope of faith renewed, with grace unbounding, and with a new chance to live with love, grace, compassion and hope. Alleluia. Amen.