

THE GIFT OF HARMONY

Carl Wilton

Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Isaiah 42:5-12; Romans 15:1-7

***“May the God of steadfastness and encouragement
grant you to live in harmony with one another,
in accordance with Christ Jesus,
so that together you may with one voice
glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”***

Romans 15:5-6

Every family has its traditions. When Claire and I first became a couple, I became acquainted with some of the differences between her family and mine.

Some of those differences were obvious. I was a WASP — a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant — from the New Jersey suburbs. Claire was Polish and Roman Catholic, from inner-city Baltimore. But apart from those demographic matters, there was one other thing about my future in-laws that stood out.

Claire’s was a family that sang. And sing they do, to this day, at every family reunion.

It began, I was told, when Claire’s father was the volunteer choir director at their church. He had eight brothers and sisters — which was certainly an advantage when it came to recruitment.

Each year, at the annual Christmas gathering, the word spreads from person to person: “We’re going to sing.” There’s no need for an announcement with instructions: everyone knows what to do. Family members get up and stand in a

circle: sopranos, altos, tenors and basses find each other. Back in the day, Claire's father used to stand there and conduct, but the choir's self-led these days.

They have song-sheets now: an accommodation to the younger generations, who didn't grow up hearing Polish in the home. But everyone knows the tunes of the lovely *kolędy*, or Polish carols. The phoneticized English words on the song sheets are much appreciated by those who would stumble over all those consonants.

As with any large family, there are a lot of quirky individuals, different predilections and persuasions, but when the circle forms at the Christmas party and the singing begins, all that is forgotten. There are only sopranos, altos, tenors and basses: voices uniting in harmony.

Harmony is the example Paul brings forth in Romans, chapter 15: as he encourages the Roman Christians to find common ground amongst some pretty serious disagreements.

There were plenty of reasons for conflict among them. To the best of our knowledge, the Roman church was comprised of both Jewish Christians and Gentiles — Greeks and Romans, in other words. Members of one faction found their grounding in the prophecies of the Hebrew scriptures, understanding Jesus to be the long-promised messiah. The Greeks and the Romans knew no Hebrew, so

they had no access to the scriptures of Israel — and, of course, the New Testament hadn't been written yet. In practice, those Gentile Christians had no scriptures at all: they depended wholly on the testimony they'd heard from the apostles.

From the previous chapter of this letter, we know there was a raging disagreement in the Roman church over dietary laws. Some of those early Christians were vegetarian: they abstained from all meat that — in that city of the Emperors — may have been supplied by the pagan temples, from animals offered for sacrifice. Others ate all kinds of food, boldly proclaiming that the pagan gods didn't exist — so it didn't matter to them where their meat came from.

There was also a division over the proper day for religious observances. One faction — the Jewish Christians, no doubt — held out for the day we call Saturday: the Jewish sabbath. Another faction — very likely, the Gentiles — preferred the day we know as Sunday, the Lord's Day.

There was no central church location, no Christian temple to rival those of Jupiter or Apollo. Those early believers met in people's homes. The different factions likely had their own accustomed meeting places — where they ate and where they worshiped according to their own preferences. This made the differences among them seem even more extreme.

Paul, who's likely writing from the Greek city of Corinth, is deeply concerned about what he's heard about these factional struggles in far-off Rome.

His deepest desire for the Roman Christians is that they find a way to discover unity despite these differences.

And so, he writes to them about harmony. But, what is this thing called harmony? If I tell you about a family, or a community, or a church that's harmonious, it means everybody's getting along just fine, right?

Of course it does. But it means so much more than that. Think with me about what harmony really is, and you'll see what I mean.

Harmony — to put it very simply — is several people singing different musical notes at the same time. It's different from unison singing, when everyone sings exactly the same thing. In harmony, there are different vocal parts: the most common divisions being soprano, alto, tenor and bass. A song written in harmony has a different musical line for each of those four parts. The genius of composers — who write the music — lies in selecting notes for each vocal part that compliment each other.

Traditionally, those different notes form chords: combinations of notes that are generally pleasing to the ear. To some *avant garde* composers, breaking from tradition, even discordant combinations — sounds that seem to clash with one another — are fair game. Even so, the combinations of notes make sense: the

singers are still cooperating with one another, to convey the emotional message the composer's trying to communicate.

So, what does that mean for the deeply conflicted Roman church? When Paul urges them to "live in harmony with one another....so that together with one voice" they may glorify God, what's he saying?

Is he saying they all need to agree about absolutely everything? No, for that's not harmony at all. That's singing the melody line only. I don't know if they had soprano, alto, tenor and bass back then, but surely they had some concept of people singing in parts. Is Paul saying that the conflict between Jew and Gentile Christian, between vegetarian and carnivore, between Saturday and Sunday worshipers, must be definitively settled, with one side triumphing over the other, before there's unity in the Roman church?

No, not at all. Paul's a wise man. He recognizes how deeply-seated these human divisions are. He takes no side in the religious food wars, nor in the worship-day wars, because he knows there's something far more important: the relationship of these Roman believers with God, through their savior Jesus Christ. Paul doesn't much care what they eat, or when they worship: only that their different voices are coming together in harmony, to praise God.

I don't need to tell any of you that we're living in a time of deep divisions in our country. From Washington, DC right on down to local town-council meetings, the red and the blue factions in the so-called culture wars have settled down into a punishing trench warfare. The old political virtue known as "reaching across the aisle" is becoming rare. Political discussions — whether in the halls of Congress or around the family dinner table — quickly degenerate from debating the issues to personal attack. You need look no farther than the cable news shows or even your Facebook or Twitter feed. Partisans on either side no longer contend that their opponents are wrong: they describe them using words like "evil."

Here's a little statistic that shows how bad things have become. Lynn Vavreck, a professor of political science at U.C.L.A., has conducted a poll, asking Americans today a question pollsters asked a very long time ago. In a 1958 opinion poll, 33 percent of Democrats said it was very important that their children marry a fellow Democrat, and 25 percent of Republicans wanted their kids to marry a Republican. When Lynn asked the very same question in 2016, she found that 60 percent of Democrats and 63 percent of Republicans felt that way. That's roughly double the number of people who feel such antipathy for members of the other party that they wouldn't want one of them in their family.¹

¹Lynn Vavreck, "A Measure of Identity: Are You Wedded to Your Party?," *New York Times*, January 31, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/31/upshot/are-you-married-to-your-party.html>

Now, here's the really interesting question for us today. Do you suppose most people with strong political convictions would say the same is true of the church? Would similar numbers of partisans on either side say they don't feel comfortable sharing a church pew with someone of the other party?

If that's the case, we just may be approaching the same intensity of conflict Paul was addressing in the church at Rome.

If that's so, there's some good news. Paul's advice is just as pertinent today, as it was back when the issues were about what sort of food you ate, or what day of the week you set aside for religious devotion. His advice is this: *You don't have to change your tune; nor do you have to silence your voice; but you do have to sing in harmony.*

When we go down to Baltimore a few days after Christmas, and the members of the extended family form that circle to sing Christmas carols, I join them. I've never learned the harmony for the Polish ones — I muddle along with the melody, and rely on the phonetic renditions of the words on the songsheets — but I do know the bass part for some of the English carols: the same ones we all know and love. I've learned that, in order to sing harmony, there are two things I have to do. I have to know my own part and join my fellow basses in singing it out

with boldness. But I also have to listen to what the others are singing. I have to honor what they bring to the common task: and I have to make sure my efforts are in sync with theirs.

I have to do these things because what we're creating, in singing harmony, is something bigger than any of the individual vocal parts. There's no room for individualism, in singing harmony. It's all about the music we make together.

Writing to another conflicted church, the one in Corinth, Paul uses a different image: the famous example of the body of Christ. In chapter 12 of First Corinthians, the body is one, but has many members. But even so, **“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’...But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another”** (1 Corinthians 12:21-25).

The eye doesn't have to transform itself into a hand, in order to get along — if it did, the body surely would be the worse for it. Nor does the eye have to somehow pretend the hand doesn't exist. They need to find a way to work together, that's all.

If, within the church, we can't find some way to transcend the differences between red and blue — if both sides can't sing together in harmony, praising our God — then what sort of gospel do we have to offer to the world?

Anne Lamott is a writer and a Presbyterian elder from California. She was a published novelist before she became a Christian, but now that she's found her way into the church, she's written some wonderful, quirky reflections on the spiritual life. She's a recovering drug addict, and sees her relationship with Jesus as essential to her continued recovery.

In her book, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne tells the story of how she discovered the church she would later join. She was in recovery by then, but having a difficult time of it. She first noticed that church because she could hear the hymn-singing from her house. At first she just stood outside, on the street, and listened. Then, she would go stand in the doorway, where she could see a little bit as well as hear.

Eventually, she joined in the singing — still standing in the doorway:

“I could sing better here,” she reflected, later, “than I ever had before. As part of these people, even though I stayed in the doorway, I did not recognize my voice or know where it was coming from, but sometimes I felt like I could sing forever.

Eventually, a few months after I started coming, I took a seat in one of the folding chairs, off by myself. Then the singing enveloped me. It was furry and resonant, coming from everyone's very heart. There was no sense of performance or judgment, only that the music was breath and food.

Something inside me that was stiff and rotting would feel soft and tender. Somehow the singing wore down all the boundaries and distinctions that kept me so isolated. Sitting there, standing with them to sing, sometimes so shaky and sick that I felt like I might tip over, I felt bigger than myself, like I was being taken care of, tricked into coming back to life.”²

The music we make here, in worship, is more than mere entertainment. Our harmonies, offered to the Lord in our many diverse voices, point the way to the healing love of God: not only for ourselves, but for others as well.

It’s important that we do not allow the storm raging outside to silence us. To the extent that we can manage, as a congregation, to keep the song going, despite our individual differences, we are witnessing to the world that Jesus offers a better way.

Let me finish today by sharing a remarkable little poem with you. Its title is simply “Music.” The poet is Anne Porter.³

The poem is under copyright, but may be viewed at this link:

<https://www.writersalmanac.org/index.html%3Fp=9278.html>

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus,

²Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (Anchor, 2000), 47-50.

³Anne Porter, “Music,” from *Living Things: Collected Poems* (Zoland Books, 2006).

**we give you thanks that you came to live with us,
to wander with us,
and that you live and wander with us still.
Teach us to trust the voices you have given us,
the harmonies we create with them,
and to honor always the voices of our fellow believers,
with whom our own voices are joined in praise. Amen.**

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