

Dance, Dance, Dance

Don't worry; this isn't going to be one of *those* sermons about dancing. I'm sure you know what I mean. Baptists, particularly Baptists from the South, have been infamous for generations for including dancing in their list of modern deadly sins along with partaking in alcohol, tobacco, playing cards and going to the picture show. It's what some folks have called the "we don't dance and we don't chew and we don't go with girls who do" school of Christian ethics. In an article written for the *Criswell Journal of Theology*, of all unlikely publications, my friend and former Southern Seminary professor, Bill Leonard, notes that in analyzing this negative preaching tradition, some have suggested "that by concentrating on individual sins of dancing and alcohol, Baptists distracted themselves from the harder and more divisive questions of such social sins as war, poverty and, of course, human slavery. For example," Leonard writes, "records of the Forks of Elkhorn Baptist Church in Kentucky from April 1815 note that a 'complaint' was made against 'Eli Clark, a black member... for parting with his Wife, getting drunk and dancing – he being then present acknowledged the charges... (and) he is by this Church excluded.' In 1815," Leonard wryly remarks, "all 'black members' of the Forks of Elkhorn Church were slaves, an issue never addressed by the disciplinary action of the congregation."

I have a rather different message about dancing this morning. I have tremendous respect for dancers, their art and their commitment to it. In my years in the theatre, I've worked with men and women who spent long hours in training for dance, who performed despite terrible injuries and pain, who sometimes could scarcely walk when offstage but who burst into brilliant and beautiful movement onstage. Their commitment and their controlled sense of abandon, spiritually and physically, in their art, have been a great example to me. Albert Einstein said, "Dancers are the athletes of God." Some dancers pay a steep price for their commitment to their art. Connie can tell you about the lack of cartilage in both her knees thanks to years of dance classes and recitals. And my thirty year association with Connie proves that John was not the last Baptist to lose his head over a pretty dancer.

Not that I'm a good dancer myself, of course. Like so many of my generation and skin tone, my idea of proper form on the dance floor includes close elbows, stiff, not quite in rhythm movement, Bill Clinton thumbs and the dreaded White Man's Overbite. Pretty pathetic, eh? But I've been told that I wasn't always such a stick in the mud when it comes to my own dancing. I've mentioned my paternal grandmother here before and her patient endurance of her many physical ailments and the tragedies in her life. But when I was back in St. Louis last month, my cousin Kim reminded me that Grandma Lucy could be a lot of fun when she was feeling well and that she sometimes gave us grandkids glimpses of what a high-spirited and mischievous girl she had been. I have a dim memory, spurred no doubt by family reminders, of the time when I was a small boy living in Florida and Grandma came down for a long visit. She would babysit me while my parents went out and we would entertain each other by dancing wildly around the living room while she strummed a toy ukulele I had. Like all small children, I'd not yet learned to be self-conscious about the physical manifestation of joy. Children are unafraid to express their joy in this way – that's why I had us sing and move to all those children's praise songs this morning. When I was a child, I could still commit my body to expressing what my heart felt. I was exuberant, like David, not cautious and calculating, like Herod.

Dance, Dance, Dance

The use of dance as an expression of the worship of Yahweh, of the exuberant joy in God's presence and of full-hearted thanks for God's gifts, has good support in the Bible. One of the great figures in the history of the Children of Israel, Miriam sang and danced her praise to God after the fleeing Hebrews were led safely across the Red Sea to escape the Egyptian Army. "Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: 'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.'" Psalm 149, which we used as our Call to Worship this morning, is not traditionally attributed to David, but the author obviously shared David and Miriam's sense of what was appropriate in true worship: "Let Israel be glad in its Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their King. Let them praise God's name with dancing, making melody to God with tambourine and lyre."

Sometimes, I think, dancing is the only way to express the depth of emotion, especially the depth of emotion in our praise to God when we have come through the darkness and into the light, when God has blessed us with the desires of our hearts. For David, the procession of the Ark of the Covenant into his new capital of Jerusalem represented the culmination of God's promise to make him the king of a united Israel, a people now freed to prosper without inter-tribal squabbling or fear of more powerful neighbors. I like the analysis I read this week from Bruce Guenther of Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary: "Why did David dance? He danced before the Ark, reckless and joyful and dare I say it, naked (or at least almost naked). I think it is because David lived dangerously all his life--with lions and bears, taunting giants and a psychologically unstable, murderous king, constantly running from or fighting marauding Philistines, etc. He was always running, hiding, praying, loving. So, David had learned to live openly, recklessly and exultantly before God. David lived life on the edge, and on this edge he knew he needed God." The great preacher Frederick Buechner also offers a compelling vision of the dancing David: "How they cut loose together, David and God, whirling around before the ark in such a passion that they caught fire from each other and blazed up in a single flame of magnificence. Not even the scolding that David got from his wife Michal afterwards could dim the glory of it."

Even in the presence of great joy in God's provision for us, there will always be the naysayers, those whose vision is not of God's goodness but of that which is not-God, the void which they believe that only human rationality can fill and control. As a quote I have been unable to attribute says, "Those who danced were thought quite mad by those who could not hear the music." David's wife Michal was one of those who could not hear the music, who thought only of what was appropriate, measured, sensible. We read that she despised her husband for his unrestrained dancing – such actions were surely only appropriate for the lower classes, not for the King! Michal did not share with David his absolute commitment to following the Spirit of God no matter where she might lead, even into the absurdity of public dance.

We should not be too hard on Michal, though. She had been given in marriage to David by her father, King Saul, as part of a plot against the young man's life, which she then helped to foil. During David's years of exile from the court and rebellion against Saul, she was then given to another man, Paltiel, as wife. David also took several other wives, cementing various political alliances, as was the custom of the time. Michal and Paltiel's marriage must have been at least reasonably happy as 2nd Samuel chapter 3 records that when David was in power and sent for

Dance, Dance, Dance

Michal that Paltiel “went with her, weeping as he walked behind her all the way to Bahurim.” To go from being the sole wife of such a devoted husband to part of the harem of a distracted king must have been a blow to Michal. David was committed and faithful to the Lord but he was less committed to faithfulness in his human relationships. I suspect that being excluded from the physical manifestation of her powerful husband’s love, as the Scripture suggests that she was, as well as from his good regard, was more of a relief to Michal than a sadness.

Likewise, I am wary of putting too much of the blame in the John the Baptist story on Herod’s step-daughter. Mark calls her Herodias, giving her the same name as her mother but the great First Century chronicler of Jewish history, Flavius Josephus, says that her name was Salome, a name that become infamous in painting, story, theatre, opera, ballet, film and song. Before we write her off as the embodiment of twisted eroticism, as so many artists have done, it is worth considering her situation. Mark refers to her as κορᾶσιον, “little girl.” She may have been merely a precocious child, called out as such children often are to entertain guests with their nascent talents, and then used by her mother without realizing the horrid implications of her parroted request. But even if she was the teenaged temptress described by Oscar Wilde, Richard Strauss, Ken Russell and so many others, she was certainly a product of her environment. Her family history was a twisted one indeed. Her grandfather, Herod the Great, was the king who ordered the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem. It was said of him that it was better to be his pigs than his sons (because - as a Jew - he would not eat his pigs). In his commentary on this passage, Jerry Goebel points out, “He killed his own sons if they threatened his throne and the ones that were left (including Philip and Herod Antipas) were conniving, weak rulers who seemed bent to rob scraps from Rome and from each other.” Herod Antipas, the Herod of this story and the one who questioned Jesus before the crucifixion, ruled Galilee from 4 BCE until 39 CE, while his brother Philip ruled Trans-Jordan from 4 BCE through 34 CE. Herodias was the granddaughter of Herod the Great through another brother, Aristobulus, but was nevertheless married to her uncle Philip until she ran off with Antipas, also her uncle. Salome, therefore, was step-daughter, niece and cousin to Herod when he promised her anything up to half his kingdom for motivations it is best not to probe too far. Jerry Springer had nothing on these folks.

Whether Salome’s dance was the provocative performance of a *femme fatale* or the innocent exuberance of a child, it must have been the committed act of a true dancer, for Mark tells us, “She pleased Herod and his guests.” So Herod made his pledge which played into the vengeful ambitions of Herodias, who told her daughter to ask for the Baptizer’s head as a reward. Herodias had clear reasons for hating John. He had been preaching against her adulterous and incestuous marriage loudly and publicly. John, after all, was committed to the truth. Mark Hoffman of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Gettysburg writes, “John the Baptist tells the truth, and this account tells the consequences... Worldly wisdom always suggests that you be cautious, reasonable, and look out for yourself. Keep your options open. Avoid commitments that may later get you stuck. Stay calm. Don’t lose your head... John the baptizer, however, was uncompromising in speaking the word given to him. He had to have known that criticizing political authority was no way to get ahead...” I do want to point out that those dreadful puns are Hoffman’s and not mine. Unlike John, Herod was very much of the worldly wisdom school that advises against commitment. Listen to what Mark tells us about him in this situation: “Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.”

Dance, Dance, Dance

Now, here is an unexpected twist – Herod liked to listen to John preach at him. We know that John’s consistent message was one of repentance, to turn away from selfishness and lawlessness and to recommit to the Way of Yahweh. But Herod couldn’t commit. One can almost imagine him going in the dark of night down to the dungeons, hearing the great prophet thundering against his evil deeds until Herod falls prostrate before the Man of God in fear and trembling for the state of his soul and then slinking back to bed with Herodias, all good intentions set aside once more for the pleasures and expediency of the moment. Herod was a man who could not commit. He shows this in his very liaison with Herodias, for in order to facilitate that relationship, he had sent his wife, a Nabataean princess, home to her father. Outraged, the Arabian king had sent his army into the field against his erstwhile son-in-law and Herod’s forces were soundly defeated. Mark says that upon Salome’s request, “The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.” He may have respected, liked and feared John but he could not commit to his message or even to saving John’s life. Far more important to him was looking like a big shot in front of his friends. He couldn’t possibly lose face before them by renegeing on an impetuous and probably drunken pledge to a young girl.

George C. Heider, Professor of Theology at Valparaiso University brings Herod’s situation home to us: “We’ve never had someone put to death for reasons of state or social convenience, but then we’ve never had the chance or need to. Our concessions to convenience and convention come in different shapes. What we share with Herod is a willingness to cut our losses and walk away from what we know to be right when one who is other becomes a problem.” But this half-hearted allegiance is not what we are called to when we walk in the Way of Jesus. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer so famously wrote, “When Jesus calls (us), he bids (us) to come and die” – to die to selfishness and petty desire, to die to concern over what the world thinks of us, to die to our fears that keep us from full commitment to Christ. As we prepare to baptize three of our young people on the 25th, we should remember the words that many of us heard at our own baptisms, that our old broken selves were “buried with Christ in baptism” and that we are “raised to walk in newness of life.”

Part of that newness of life must be the same full-hearted, whole-bodied commitment to God evidenced by David the dancer. In her commentary on the 2nd Samuel passage, Kate Huey asks “Have we tamed the gospel? How passionate is our worship, how exuberant our praise, how deep our awe at what God is doing in our lives and in the life of the world? Do we really know what it feels like to rejoice “with all our might” because God is present in our lives? Have we ever felt so full of exultation about Who God Is that we want to dance without inhibition, right in front of our family, our friends, and our community? Or are we closer to being the “frozen chosen” who sit almost immobile in our pews?” Bruce Guenther has a word of challenge for us: “We need to be Davids who are living life on the edge, who are not afraid to dance when they worship, and who live life with such abandon for God that “trusting God” actually means something substantive. The lesson from David is that we don’t have to be careful and cautious with God; that it is death to decorously and politely manage God; that it is life eternal to let him take care of us... May God help you as a congregation, to be as fully alive and passionate to God as David was. I’d invite you as individuals to worship God with abandon, and to ponder how your act of worship will impact your decisions and actions this week. In so doing we will meet God in a new way, and our friends and neighbors too will discover the reality of our God.”

Dance, Dance, Dance

You see, I believe, like the Second Century French theologian Irenaeus that “The glory of God is the human person fully alive,” and that includes our bodies as well as our minds and our spirits. I believe that God honors the commitment that is modeled for us by dancers because God Godself is a dancer. My favorite image of the preposterous Christian doctrine of the Trinity is the perichoresis, the dance of Father, Son and Holy Spirit first imagined by the Eighth Century theologian John of Damascus, a dance of love into which we are being drawn as we learn to live fully the abundant life. The image of perichoresis always invokes for me a memory which I’ve described to you before. When Kit was still very small and I was in seminary, my class schedule and Connie’s work schedule meant that I was his primary care giver. We had some quiet time together in the morning before my classes and after class I would pick him up from day care to be with me while I did homework and cooked supper. One of our favorite fun things to do together, once the homework was done and before supper, was for me to put on loud, happy rock & roll (usually Bruce Springsteen) and to dance him all around the living room of our little Seminary Village apartment. I would spin him around in the air and he would laugh and laugh. When I think of life in relationship to our loving Three-Personed God, I think of being caught up in that joyful dance, that perichoresis, and being spun around like a little child and laughing and laughing. I find myself in agreement with Friedrich Nietzsche, who wrote, “I would only believe in a God who knew how to dance.”

There is a Japanese proverb that says, “We’re fools whether we dance or not, so we might as well dance.” I think that proverb is especially applicable to Christians. In the eyes of the world, we’re fools anyway. We put our faith in a Creator that many say does not exist. We follow the teachings of a condemned criminal, one whom we claim rose from the dead three days after his brutal execution. We proclaim and hopefully practice such counter-cultural ideals as forgiving and even loving our enemies, setting aside our own desires in favor of the good of others, embracing as brothers and sisters those who are different from us, who are social pariahs, the ones the world considers tainted, diseased, hopeless. This foolish life we lead demands the total commitment of the dancer, to go on practicing our calling in spite of setbacks, pain and derision. We try to live out a much more modern proverb: “Work like you don’t need the money, love like your heart has never been broken, and dance like no one is watching.” And so, my sisters and my brothers, let us dance into life, though the world would think us foolish. Let us lay aside our inhibitions and commit ourselves to our loving, dancing God and let us carry the dance into all the world and teach it to all we know. Let us walk and dance in the Spirit of God. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, let us dance, dance, dance!