

A Tale of Two Dances

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12-19 Crossroads Christian Church

Mark 6:14-29

July 12, 2015

Pentecost 5

Because I believe in truth in advertising, I should give you the following disclaimer. My sermon title is a tale of two dances, and I know virtually nothing about dancing. I am what they call choreographically challenged, a real klutz. I don't know my left foot from my left. So don't worry, I'm not going to try any moves to illustrate my points, I'm just going to talk, and maybe wave my hands around a bit.

Back at Culver-Stockton College, we had a wonderful ancient history professor, John Sperry. who often started essay questions on tests with those frightening words, "Compare and contrast." Today's scripture readings offered two very different stories about when and why two very different people danced, and so I'm going to compare and contrast them. Why? Because they're fascinating stories in themselves, they offer real insight into human nature, and they offer insight into our relationship with God.

Our first dancer was King David himself. We've been following his career in a hit and miss way over the past few weeks. We heard about Saul anointing him as a king in God's eyes but not in political reality; we heard about the brave young man slaying the giant Goliath. But after that, Saul was killed in battle, and David was crowned king. Why was David the King dancing in our story? Because it was a time of national triumph. A key city had fallen into his hands. It sat on a hill, and it was at a neutral location, so it could serve as a religious and political capitol for all the twelve tribes of Israel. It was a city called Jerusalem. And they were taking the Ark of the Covenant back home. The Hebrews had built the ark in the desert, on their way from Egypt to the Promised Land, as a holy storage chest to carry the tablets of the Ten Commandments. The ark was a constant reminder of God's presence. The Israelites had always considered the Ark as a sign that God was on their side, and that they would never be defeated, and so they carried it into battle with them. But it had gotten to the point where they trusted the ark rather than God. Several years before the time of this story, the unthinkable happened. The Philistines had captured the ark—it had fallen into pagan hands. Eventually, the Israelites won back the ark, but where were they to put it? For a few years, while the nation was at war, it was kept in a private home. But now David was going to take it to their new city, their new capital, Jerusalem, and that would be its new home. Because of all this, David and the people were on a roll. They were ecstatically happy. Thousands formed a grand processional, a victory parade, and walked to Jerusalem. Well, they didn't just walk, they danced for joy. In that

day sometimes, Hebrew prophets would be so overcome by the spirit that they would dance, wildly and joyfully. They started it. Others walking along the way picked up the idea. And finally, the king himself, clad in a linen priestly garment, picked up the beat. David was a musician, of course, but this time he let himself go—you can imagine twirls, somersaults, leaps, sort of like Snoopy danced when Charlie Brown brought out his food bowl. Well! Can you imagine? The head of state and all his cabinet were dancing along the road! Where was his dignity? That's what his wife Michal, Saul's daughter, wondered. Like many wives of uninhibited husbands, she was embarrassed—so embarrassed that she ended up despising her husband. That's the downside of getting carried away, I guess.

It's hard to imagine us dancing before the Lord, isn't it? Some Pentecostals do, some Latin or African-American congregations do, and it's right for them. But we're more like Michal. We're reserved, laid-back, inhibited in how we express our feelings, and maybe that's right for us. But maybe we should ask ourselves something—do we ever really know the joy of God's presence enough to make us even think about dancing before the Lord? If we don't, it isn't because God doesn't offer us that kind of joy. It's there for us to receive, if we truly offer ourselves to God's love.

Some of you remember with me back to 1993, the year of the flood, when the Disciples and UCC had their joint national meeting in St Louis. Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa gave an inspiring address, and the closing song was Siyahamba—we are marching to the light of God. As we sang, we all spilled out from our seats and moved around the auditorium, swaying up and down the aisles in pure joy. It was that same joy, that gift of God, which had motivated David to dance.

The second dance in our scripture was from our gospel lesson, and it's a much darker, more sinister dance. Gospel is supposed to mean Good News, but this is a bad news story. This is one of the few readings from the Gospel that seems to have no gospel—no good news, only bad news. John the Baptist was a prophet. He thundered that a righteous God's day of judgment was coming upon an unrighteous land. And he was specific about what unrighteousness was leading them to trouble. People only had to look to the royal household, and what could they see? Adultery, incest, marriages of convenience, rank abuse of power, brutality, and the list went on. A tyranny can't stand to hear that kind of truth challenging power, and so Herod Antipas had John the Baptist arrested to silence him. The people respected John as a prophet, a true man of God, and even the king himself had a fearful fascination of and respect for John. Herod had married his sister-in-law, and John had denounced the marriage.

Herod, again and again, tried to deflect his wife's rage, tried to keep John the Baptist safe. But then came the birthday party. The entertainment for this party was a dance by his daughter, and his daughter used the dance to seduce the king, to so fill him with lust as to make him pliable, to make him want to do anything for her. Through the dance, she used her sexuality to manipulate the king—and it worked. He offered her anything, up to half the kingdom—and what did she want? The head of John the Baptist, served on a plate. Was she trying to please her mother, who hated John so much, or did she hate him too? Herodias trapped Herod Antipas in his own promises, and reluctantly he gave in and ordered the terrible deed to be done. What was John's crime? Telling the truth in the name of God. Like other prophets before him, John paid for his convictions with his life. A good and righteous man, the one who had been preparing the way for Jesus by calling people to repent, had pushed the envelope too far and met a brutal fate. This was a foreshadowing of what would later happen to Jesus, when truth would once again challenge selfish power and would be hung out on a cross. Joanna Adams said: "it would take more than a decapitation to stop the truth of God, more than a crucifixion to stop the Son of God, more than persecution to stop the mission of God."¹(unquote)

So we have two dances that describe something of the spectrum of the human condition—from unabashed joy in the wonders of God's love to unabashed manipulation for the sake of cruelty and hatred. Obviously, I recommend the first one—dancing for joy in the light of God's love.

I remember a few years ago preaching at Celebration Christian Church in St. Peter's, Missouri, where my oldest daughter and her family are members. As the band was playing a bouncy number, a little girl, 3 or 4 maybe, got right up on the sanctuary platform, and started doing her own little interpretive dance, a dance of pure joy. Her sermon was better than mine, I think.

Imagine, if you would, another young child dancing with her father. She steps onto her daddy's feet and holds on tight, as dad provides the motion, and they swirl across the floor together.

Now imagine that you are that child and God is the father. God says, "Dance with me the life of faith, the life of love." And you say, "I'm afraid that I will stumble and fall, and look foolish. You are so big. I am so small." And God says, "Climb aboard, and dance on my feet." You step up onto God's feet, and you hold on for dear life. You get caught up in the music, and most of all, you get caught up in the love of God just filling your soul.

¹ Joanna Adams, post on Midrash.com.

So let us join in the dance of faith and love. Let us praise God, because God is so kind to us, so very kind to us. Let us praise Christ, who offered himself for us. Let us praise the Spirit, who makes us sure that God's promises are true. Now that's something worth dancing about. Amen.