

Words to Live By: Dance Before the Lord
Psalm 149:1-4, II Samuel 6:12-15
July 26, 2009

There's a dance sensation sweeping the nation. *Dancing With the Stars* has been a wildly popular TV show. It has been joined by *So You Think You Can Dance?* What's even more surprising is that Americans aren't simply watching these shows. We're actually hitting the dance floor ourselves. Tango, swing, and ballroom dancing have been on the rise for more than a decade, pre-dating the TV dance craze. Studios are seeing a 30 or 40 percent increase in students during the past 10 years, despite the fact that dance lessons can cost up to \$100 an hour. We're not only watching dance, we're doing dance – or trying to anyway!

If you want to dance you can choose the tango, the tarantella, the turkey-trot, two-step or the twist. You have the choice of the cake-walk, can-can, clogging, contra dance, cotton-eyed Joe, and conga line. There is the bamba, bolero, boogie-woogie, bossa-nova, and bunny hop. And if you can keep the band playing there's the mamba, meringue, mazurka, minuet, and macumbo. According to the Arthur Murray dictionary of Dance, there are nearly 200 different dances in the Western Hemisphere which are danced simply for fun or romance. Some of these dances may be performed on stage by professional groups, but they all have their origin with the common folk.

Dance is nothing new on the human scene. Dance has been an important part of ceremony, rituals, celebrations, and entertainment since before the birth of human civilizations. Before humans had written language, dance was one method of passing stories from one generation to the next.

In the history of dance, there have generally been two forms of dance: social and ritual. Social dances celebrated births, commemorated deaths, and marked life events in between. Religious or ritual dances were ways of asking the gods to end famine, provide rain, or cure the sick. Medicine men were among the first choreographers and composers of formal dance.

Originally dances were accompanied by a rhythmic beat to allow all the dancers to keep time together, remember the movements, and regulate the pace. Eventually melodies were added, but the rhythmic beat is the foundation for the dance.

Today in our reading from II Samuel, we hear of David dancing as he leads the procession of Israel and the Ark of God into Jerusalem. The Ark was the most sacred object of the Hebrew people. It was a piece of furniture containing the tablets with the commandments given to Moses. It had accompanied the people of Israel during their journey to the Promised Land and was with them while they settled in that land. The Ark had been captured by the Philistines, enemies of the

Israelites, for a period of time, but the awesome power of the Ark frightened these foreigners. They returned the Ark to Israel, but it resided in someone's home for 20 years. When David established Jerusalem as the seat of power, it was appropriate to restore the Ark to the center of the people's shared life together. As a visible symbol of God's presence with the people, David wanted to bring the Ark to Jerusalem as a symbolic way of placing God at the center of their life and community.

The people were assembled for the holy pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They retrieved the Ark from the storage locker and placed it in a cart, accompanied by a procession of Israelites. But the Ark was intended to be carried, by designated people, on poles threaded through rings on its side. The process was delayed for three months until David returned to carry the Ark according to the Law. At the head of the procession of people walking the Ark into Jerusalem was David, dancing with all his might, to the rhythm of tambourines, castanets, cymbals, and trumpets. David danced before the Lord, moving his body in joyous rhythm to the music. God was with David and his people. It was reason to dance and to rejoice. In fact, in Aramaic, the language of Jesus, the same word for dance also means rejoice.

In the Psalms we often hear the summons to praise the Lord with dance. As we ponder the goodness of God, the rich wonders of creation, one of the natural expressions of praise is dance. It pleases God when we express our joy, our faith, and our praise in dance. David's dance before the Lord was an expression of devotion and piety.

It was common for people to dance their prayers, their praise, their sorrow. They danced their wonder and awe. They danced for the rains to come and the winds to cease. They danced for strength, wisdom, and guidance.

We don't tend to dance much in worship any more. There has been a revival of sorts of liturgical dance in the past couple of decades. But we tend to have lost such physical expression of our emotions to God. And yet it can be a meaningful and sometimes spontaneous means of expressing ourselves to God.

In the prayer groups we had during Lent, one of the weeks we experimented with praying with our bodies. We were invited to take a posture inspired by an object of creation such as a tree, extending our arms in the way the tree branches reached toward the sky. As scripture suggests, we lifted our arms in praise to God. We used our hands to dance in response to a scripture reading. This was a new way of praying for many!

Dancing can be done individually or communally. If you are less sure of your skill, like me, you might dance your prayer and praise to God in the privacy of your own four walls! But there is also great delight in dancing in community. In synchronizing our movements with others, we create a moment of harmony in

the human family. If we fall out of step, the community surrounds us in a way to bring us back into accord. Dance partners can teach us new steps to enhance our ability and take us into deeper experiences.

When we dance before God, we might move in unexpected patterns. We will likely be introduced to unlikely partners whom we never would have otherwise met. We will be encouraged to take new movements in the journey of faith. This is the beauty of dance in the Christian community.

When community of faith dances, we dance to the heartbeat of God. We listen for the rhythm of the Holy Spirit and seek to synchronize our movements with the Spirit of God. As David placed the Ark at the center of the life of his people, we continue to place God at the center of our life together. We seek to tune our actions and lives to the beat set by God. We have found the heartbeat of God expressed most fully by Jesus, whom we know from one of our favorite songs as the Lord of the Dance. As he did with the fishermen, Peter and Andrew, Jesus calls us out onto the dance floor of new adventure. He teaches us new steps so that we can be in sync with the One who shaped and designed human life.

A young man named Matt found community has created a picture of what can happen when people join together in dance. (Dance 2008 video from www.wherethehellismatt.com)

God delights when we respond to God's presence in our lives through dance, rhythm, and song. As David exemplified, exuberant rejoicing is an appropriate expression of love for God.

May we dare to dance before the Lord, expressing our praise and joy in the greatness and goodness of our awesome God, uniting the Christian community in harmony and love.

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