

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Dancing Lessons"
Dr. J. Dent

July 15, 2012
7th Sunday after Pentecost

Last week we looked at the use of music for worship since the dawn of human civilization. We find in music an expression of our very selves toward God something that is greater than just words. This week we look at dance, which must also certainly date back to the earliest remnants of humanity.

Dance in the ancient world was more than a way for male and female to court each other toward marriage, more than a personal expression of the individual within a group setting. Dance was an expression of a person within their society, a response to music and a response to other human beings and a response to God. Dance was not considered a spectator's sport, as found in the NT reading. Nor was it something to compete against, such in the modern "reality" TV shows. It was a combining of mind and body to express one's relationship to God and to others.

Many of us have had both positive and negative experiences of dance. I remember being encouraged or forced to learn the major ballroom dances in the junior high era of my life in a program called "cotillion." I had lots of various attractions and repulsions to the notion of learning to dance properly and the awkwardness of what it meant to touch young women appropriately in that context. In contrast to this cotillion, ballroom experience, was the high school dance in my teen years: a kind of free form movement to the various pop styles, rock or country or whatever you would call the styles of the day. What was dance in your background? My mother recalls the first time the big bands played. Dancers would stop and marvel at the tremendous live sound coming from that genre.

Was dance popular in your culture or sub-culture? Or was it frowned upon by your family? What do you think today about dancing? Is it something you would look forward to, if you felt well enough in your body to do it? Or is it something to be avoided, a necessary evil that only comes up as a challenge or opportunity during wedding receptions?

I've taken more dance lessons since we were married. We can do this and that on the dance floor. But the older memories from my childhood are not too far away.

As we turn to the Scriptures, we find two interesting passages on dancing. The first is in the OT from 2 Samuel 6, where David danced mightily before the Lord. I hope you noted that a section between verses 6 and 12 was omitted. The lectionary editors have a funny practice of omitting parts of stories. This particular part of the story is crucial to overall plot. So David is moving the ark of the covenant from the tabernacle to Jerusalem, also called the City of David, formerly Jebus. As prescribed by the Law, only certain Levites are allowed to hold the two polls, two men bearing or steadying the weight of the gold overlaid wooden box, led by oxen on a new cart. This ark of the covenant had golden cherubim on the top and inside was the tablet of the ten commandments, Aaron's rod that had flowered and produced almonds, some manna from the 40 years in the desert. It was a memory box and the center of where God's presence was in the Temple. On the way, the oxen stumbled, one of the men touched the side of the box to steady it and that man immediately fell dead, because he broke the law of not touching the sacred ark. Now you know why the lectionary folks didn't want you to read that part because it contains God's judgment. There are many parts in the OT where God gives capital punishment when his laws are clearly violated. We bristle at this, but there was a clarity that God brought to many situations which before had unclear, and even more severe consequences. For instance, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth was an improvement over one person wiping out a whole village because their family member was assaulted or maimed or even murdered. We can't in the end see the capital punishment in its historical context, but we can remember that Jesus teaches us to love our neighbor and to love our enemies.

Anyway, David was very distressed by the death of one of the Levites, named Uzzah. David had been dancing and celebrating before God. This apparently was a way to praise God and worship God which he and God found very appropriate, but his wife Michal did not. In any case, the ark of the covenant was left with Obed-Edom for three months, while David prayed and planned for the next attempt to bring the sacred box of the Lord into Jerusalem. This second attempt was filled with many sacrifices and a strong dance, shouts and trumpets and gifts of dates and raisins for the people. It was a great celebration with David in his linen ephod. It was a sleeveless undergarment that came down to his hip. Many sermons, I'm

sure, have been preached on David dancing in his underwear. This then explains his wife Michal despising him for doing so and criticizing him. But the ephod was a priestly garment. It was simple and not immodest compared to what we see today. But David was king and he cared more about what God thought of his worship than his wife and all the other people. That is the main story here. He worshipped God with all his might and made sure he was faithful in worship.

Today, many of us worship when it is convenient. During the summer, many people tell me they are on holiday and don't have time or interest in Sunday services where they go. May I strongly suggest that you take the time to worship throughout the Summer and the rest of the year. There are many excuses, but we need to follow David's example.

Also, you have seen interpretive dance and liturgical dance rarely, but have seen it here at St. David's and perhaps you have seen it in other churches. I find the practice to appropriate and beautiful. I do appreciate the dancers wearing appropriate clothing so as to concentrate on the worship more than the dancer. I am not saying we will regularly see liturgical dance here, but rather just for the record say I believe the practice is biblical. I also believe that the expression of the arts, whether visual arts, musical arts, dance or verbal arts are all from God and well returned back to God for God's worship. The whole of our life can be consecrated to God's use and purposes.

We also know that dance can be used to other purposes. Whether down on George St. in a strip club, or in front of the king to sexually arouse him, the dance can be used for the opposite of worship; for the opposite of appropriate fun and recreation. We find King Herod painting himself into a corner and murdering John the Baptizer as a result. Herodias' mother didn't like being criticized by the prophet John. Her daughter caught king Herod in making a promise to do anything for her, up to half his kingdom. So she asked that he kill John, and he did.

We too must be careful in our use of the dance, in our spectator sports. We need to be wise with what we promise, and careful in what we say. We too can find ourselves agreeing with violence and murder before we know it.

So the dancing lessons for today are not so much how to move, or even how to move with a partner. The dancing lessons today are about our desire to

worship, our openness to artistic expression of the arts as a means of worship and the risk of something new. Because this Fall we are going to introduce into our worship service some new contemporary music, not unlike the jazz band of last week on a monthly basis into our Sunday morning worship. We will be enjoying drums, bass, guitar, keyboard and voices where all of us will learn some new music and also some music you already know from the hymnal. We trust that this new move of music will open us further to the Holy Spirit and that you will be encouraged. If you are worried or have concerns about this, don't hesitate to talk to me or one of the elders. Or if, on the other hand, you are excited about the possibility of musical variety as outlined above, you can also tell me or one of the elders that you look forward to this.

We trust the Lord to lead us into new and helpful forms of worship, that are not really new at all, but go back to the ancient tradition of Israel and the NT model of praising the Lord with all that we are: body, soul and spirit.

Let us pray.