

The Freedom to Dance

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Matthew 11: 16-30

We stood around the walls of the middle school gym with a couple of our buddies and laughed. We secretly pointed to and made fun of the way certain kids danced, or how they were dressed, or the way they looked. We did all of that, of course, because we were at a middle school dance and we were in the seventh grade and we carried around with us the tremendous burden of having to look and be cool. And because that burden weighed so heavily on our backs, we were not free to dance, even though we would have really liked to. But, of course, we couldn't admit that either. We couldn't mourn our predicament, and be moved to action by our grief, either. We were too cool for that. What a heavy burden. We thought and acted like we had it all figured out. What a heavy burden. We couldn't know the joy of dancing.

“To what will I compare this generation,” Jesus asks? “It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating or drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'” Apparently, there were lots of people who stood on the sidelines and criticized. They lined the inside of the middle school gym walls and did not recognize the ones right in front of them, sent to them by God.

And who were these people? Judging from the verses that come right after, they were those who thought they had things pretty well all figured out, and that they were in the “right.” See, Chorazin and Bethsaida, the cities that were the brunt of Jesus' judgment, certainly here represent the cities of Galilee that were populated by God's “chosen” people who awaited the Messiah. Because, Jesus contrasts them with Tyre and Sidon, which were two notoriously heathen, gentile cities! They were utterly secular cities, known to live pretty much for themselves and their own pleasure. Says Jesus, Tyre and Sidon will fare better on the day of judgment.

It's a stinging word in a time like ours when many want to blame secularism for the troubles in our society. But, even more stinging perhaps were Jesus' words for the folks of Capernaum, which was the city where Jesus had made his home. For, in regard to them he quotes a verse from Isaiah that has to do with pride. “Will you be exalted to heaven?” Most likely he's taking aim at the pride those people took in having the famous prophet Jesus in their midst. They felt merit in being associated with him, but didn't really try to follow him. They were admirers of Jesus, but not *disciples*. But, they were all the “right” ones, the wise and intelligent. They were “right” either for being the truly religious, or for being associated with the truly righteous one.

When we think we have it all pretty well figured out, even when we think we have ourselves pretty well figured out, it is hard for us to recognize the people sent into our lives by God. Any of you who receive the Harrisonburg District newsletter probably got a good chuckle of recognition out of the letter from the D.S. in the last issue. It relates to some of the categories of folks in the church today who have it all figured out in one way or another. In this day when there's such an emphasis on reaching the “unchurched,” he quotes an article by Bob Kaylor in which he lists a number of types of “churched” people that reveals that they aren't really different from the “unchurched.”

Some of these include: the “De-churched”...that's people who populate the rolls but who don't attend anymore. And, he notes that while some leave for personal reasons, many of these leave in a huff over something the pastor did. Ed said he had one guy leave the church once because they didn't sing “The First Noel” on Christmas Eve. Then, there are the “re-churched”...folks who became de-churched under the last pastor and who come back now that things are “better”

under your leadership. Better” that is, until you preach any sermon that references tithing or sex. Then, they'll recycle to the de-churched list. There are the “Mis-churched”... people who keep telling you how much better it was at their old church in another town. And there are the “Hyper-churched”... folks who spend all their time worrying about church stuff. These are people who write you anonymous notes, saying things like, “Pastor, I was lying awake last night worrying about your new haircut and whether it's really appropriate for a minister...whether it's spiritual enough.”

And then this last group I'll tell you about, I'm not sure fits in here as far as thinking they have things all figured out, although it might, but it certainly relates as far as staying on the sidelines...they are the “extra-churched”... people (usually men) who tell you that they worshiped God on the golf course Sunday morning. They think of yelling “Jesus!” at a shanked five-iron as an act of praise.

There were others listed. But, you have to wonder what motivates us when we act in these ways. Because, it wouldn't seem to be truth, would it? It wouldn't seem to be any really honest attempt to give ourselves over to the truth that is Jesus. It would seem rather to be control. Personal power and control. Control over our Sunday mornings at least, if not control over the church and what happens here, or control over others who are here with us. I wonder, on this Independence Day weekend, is that freedom? I hope that the way we've defined freedom hasn't come down to that. Personal power and control? The freedom to do and say whatever we want and to feel justified in it? Because that feels to me more like just reacting to the burdens we feel we are carrying.

A few years ago, now Bishop Will Willimon predicted that “our age shall be known, not as the age of freedom, but as the age of anxiety. We are anxious about many things: having enough money, having good enough health, being secure and safe.” Those are heavy burdens. And the ability to simply react and respond to those anxieties and try to gain some measure of control over some part of our lives doesn't really feel like freedom, does it? How can we be *truly* free? Our faith and this scripture say that has something to do with recognizing God's presence in your life. And it says that when we're busy trying to control things, and thinking we've got it figured out “right,” or thinking it's about getting it all figured out, we don't recognize God's real presence, we miss the ones sent to us by God.

Listen again to these verses in Matthew. Jesus tells us that God is known only by “infants” -- that is, only in a relationship of complete trust and dependence. That's the knowledge of infants, isn't it? They know their parents not by taking thought, but by being in a trusting and dependent relationship. And not only does Jesus say that these are the only ones who know God, but that that's the way God planned it. And that that is *grace*.

Now, how is it grace you might ask, that some know God and others don't? It's because it's grace to be able to finally release the burden of trying in a thousand ways to be God. It's grace to finally let God be God. You see, it's not that “this generation” that Jesus spoke of had decided to ignore what has been revealed. Says Jesus, God has *kept* them from seeing by the hiddenness of how God comes in the “un-cool” one ... the outcast, unexpected one of Jesus. And on the other hand, it's not that those who follow do so because of their superior insight. It's just when you're simply trusting and dependent, you *let* God be God.

And what a relief. Says Jesus, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart...” Be, not independent, but dependent on being yoked in with Jesus, and you will know true freedom, because then you'll know God. Then you'll be who God intends you to be. You remember what the apostle Paul wrote: “Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” Friends, freedom...true freedom is in relationship. We can be truly free when we're

yoked to Jesus, free from having to be “right,” and so free from having to divide the world accordingly. True freedom is in relationship with Christ and with each other.

I'm reminded of a story Fred Craddock told of a time when he was serving a little church down in the mountains of northwestern Georgia. He got a call one day from one of the other ministers there in town. The man said, “Pastor Fred, we were wondering if you were going to be joining us for the anti-abortion march through town this Saturday.” And Craddock asked the man, “Well, who's getting an abortion?” And the other pastor said, “Well, not anyone that I know personally.” And Craddock replied, “Well, then why are we marching?”

Friends, for Christians freedom means being, in relationship with others, the one whom God intends us to be. Yoked to Jesus, we can do that can't we? For he is the One who is *fully* human, the new Adam. Without that, we will be constantly under the heavy burden of trying to be “right,” tossed around this way and that. Here is the invitation of Jesus: Come to me. Let me take those burdens off your back. Yoked to me, let me teach you how to dance. Let me give you the freedom to dance.

Anglican archbishop, Rowan Williams describes how that dance might look in talking about the work of a young Chilean teacher in Australia who developed dance and drama with the mentally handicapped. It was shown in a British television documentary called *Stepping Out*. The show begins with: “scenes showing the very first stages, as these young people in their twenties and thirties gradually learned controlled breathing, coordinated movement, learned to relax into their bodies and *live* in them. Then (you) saw the build-up, as costumes and masks were tried on, the music became more adventurous, the dancing more subtle; and the emergence of ...Chris as the natural soloist of the group, dancing to Villa-Lobos and Puccini, portraying the death of Madame Butterfly with total conviction, at a level of ritual pathos which few professionals could manage.

You watched the awkward, superficial, lumpy and vacant face of a “retarded” man turn into a tragic mask: every inch, every corner of the body answering the music with discipline, accuracy, complete engagement. And the climax, a breathtaking performance in the Sydney Opera House, no less, was greeted with a standing ovation.” Williams says it would have been easy for anyone, himself included, to watch this documentary ready to be moved in a patronizing way by the so-called retarded trying to dance. But, he says that the “only final response worth making was humble, awed delight. We'd been watching grace in every sense. We'd been watching love, the patient, humorous, grave care of the teacher, getting these people to value and admire their bodies, giving words and hugs of encouragement to each one as they prepared to perform.”

Finally, he suggests that we learn to listen to Jesus' invitation: “Sit down, all of you handicapped, lumpy, empty, afraid, and start to feel that you too are rooted in a firm, rich earth. Opposite you is someone who, it seems, doesn't need to learn. His roots are very deep, very deep indeed; he knows he is lovely and loved. Dancing is natural to him, he has no paralyzing, self-conscious dread, no self-protection to overcome. So he begins: he stretches out his arms, wide as he can. And so do you. Then he rises up, arms to the sky. And so do you. Then he takes your hand and swings you loose and leaves you to improvise the music – on your own, then combining with the others, then alone again, then with one or two, then all together, and alone again.” We can leave the middle school gym wall and dance with each other despite who we know these others to be. This is the rest Jesus offers us, and it is true freedom. We can trust his lead, and learn the steps from him. Come let us take his life into yourselves and learn the joy of the dance of *real* life. Amen.