

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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Maybe We Should Dance
Isaiah 61.1-4; Luke 4.16-21
Russ Dean, May 4, 2008



In the apocryphal book (one of those ancient books of the early church, which did not become scripture), the book called *The Acts of St. John*, Jesus is recorded as saying, “Whoever does not dance, does not know what is coming to pass.” One of Baptists great sins is that we have become known as a people who are against dancing! And, ironically, the reason Baptists have been against dancing, as far as I’m concerned, is the only proof we need that it is a gift of God. You see, religious Baptists¹ have been against dancing because it’s too carnal, too bodily, too much of the flesh. (So that must be bad, they contend.) But God created us, as embodied spirits. And in scripture God says this is a good thing! According to that same creation narrative, you are not a fleshly house with a soul living down deep within. You are a living soul. Soul and your flesh are of one piece. Your body, as it were, just gives a physical shape to your soul!²

At a birthday party in the home of friends one night, a two-year-old entered the room just as someone turned on the music... and it was automatic. I have heard that humans are the only animal creatures who have to teach their young to swim. But, let me assure you that no one has ever had to teach a two-year-old how to dance! We come into this world knowing how to move with the music! As soon as

¹ I use this reference intentionally, “religious Baptists,” in keeping with the distinction I make between religion (with negative connotations) and faith. I preached on this subject last week, “Preaching to the Already Religious,” and try to consistently promote a healthy, Jesus-inspired view of faith, which may at times present itself in direct opposition to the commonly accepted religious practices of “the ‘established’ Church. My friend, the late Dr. Gene Owens wrote a book, whose title captures my own understanding: *Confessions of a Religionless Christian*.

² Though this sermon does not need to diverge into a discussion of dualism, I was taught in seminary, and have come to affirm through my own study, that scripture does not present a philosophy of dualism (though this is the prevailing view in the church!). The creation narrative says that God created the first human beings and blew the breath of life into them. They were *nephesh*: “living souls.” Paul, in keeping with his Hebraic upbringing, also combated a dualistic view (which was a Greek concept) when he affirmed the resurrection of the body – not the resurrection of the soul from the body: *this mortal body must put on immortality* (1 Corinthians 15.53). Or, as the old gospel tune puts it, “I’ll have a new body!” What difference would it make if we, the Church, could affirm such a biblical theology? Think of those whose goal is to “save souls.” What are the implications, if the soul and the body are one and the same!?

that energy hit his two-year-old soul, his two-year-old body came unhinged. (They are one and the same!)

And it was pure joy! For a two-year-old, and for all who were swept up in his experience of it.

How has the Church so often gotten faith so wrong!?

Last week, I suggested to you that it is because we have wrongly made faith about religion (rules), when it is mainly about our relationships. (You know, it's prepositions, not propositions that count!) "When (the fiery eighteenth-century) Jonathan Edwards proposed signs to separate true religious experience from its counterfeits, the Puritan preacher recommended that we look for joy. It was, he held, the dead giveaway that God was present in someone's life."³ He may just be right. And what is more likely to make us joyful? Days filled with checking off the rules we've kept (and anxiously noting all the ones we have broken), or a life that is marked by looking for, and finding, God in the midst of our various relationships, which will invariably be marked with success, and failure!? (God is in both...)

What metaphor best describes the church (both here in our midst, and the Church, universal), is it a dirge... or is it a dance? For ourselves and for our world... maybe we should dance!

If we think of Jesus as some dour religionist, sour-faced and gloomy, angry and judgmental, finger-wagging, and fire-breathing... we have not read our scripture very well. For it could have been that his joyful, joy filled, "life-of-the-party" nature is what first drew the attention of the religious establishment – and then their scorn. As we often do, they associated his joyous nature with some kind of care-free, irreverent philosophy. If we read more carefully, though, we will find that it was precisely this joy that indicated his faith.

So, what was it that caused Jesus to sing and dance? (to use the metaphor) There is no better text than this passage from one of the Servant Songs of Isaiah to help us explore the faith

³ Doris Donnelly, "Good Tidings of Great Joy," in "Weavings," Nov.-Dec. 1993, p.7.

of Jesus Christ. For this was the text he used to define for his hometown crowd (in his own church, no less) his calling. *God has anointed me...* Though there is certainly an amount of “*fear and trembling*” (Philippians 2.12) that comes with such an affirmation, it was also the source of Jesus’ conviction. And, to what had God anointed him? What was to be the content of his vocational mission? To what joy was he called? *...to bring good news to the poor (the oppressed)... to bind up the broken-hearted... to proclaim liberty to the captives... release to the prisoners... to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor...* Therein, Jesus found his joy, in this calling – to the poor, the broken-hearted, the prisoners, those who needed to know of God’s favor.

If the Church sometimes lacks a reputation for being filled with a joyful spirit, let us not miss the irony. Jesus’ call was to the poor, yet there is too often no joy in our dealings with them. We dread to see them coming, don’t we? What do they want this time? Why don’t they just get a job, and quit bothering us? They are a blight on our world-class city – dirty clothes, outstretched hand. They are an embarrassment and the cause of scorn, not compassion; they are a source of confusion or tension or anxiety... but not joy!

Jesus’ call was to the broken-hearted, but the broken-hearted make us sad, so we often turn away. When we see the neighbor, recently diagnosed with cancer, at the other end of the aisle in the supermarket... we hustle on to the checkout. When we meet the colleague at the water fountain, whose wife just left him for her boss... we quickly invoke a conversation about the NFL draft, or the Wachovia championship. If we don’t need their pain to interrupt our world, too, it can only be because there is not enough joy in our world – or our eyes are not open to it.

Jesus had joy for the release of prisoners, yet we can hardly get another prison built soon enough. We have made incarceration, not release, a source of economic growth in this country.

One of the great tragedies of this society is that we would rather throw away an entire generation of fathers and citizens, young men whose potential will never be known, than to ask if we have any responsibility to them – why they failed to begin with, how we might be a part of their rehabilitation. The United States of America now has more of our population incarcerated, both by raw number and by percentage, than any nation in the world. It was recently announced that a full one percent of our total population is imprisoned. We may feel good about such criminal “justice,” because it gives a sense of security (it is a false sense) – but we will never know Jesus’ joy, joy that is meant for those in bondage, figurative and literal, if we continue down this road.

Jesus’ call was to proclaim the *year of the Lord’s favor*. I can hardly think of a phrase less characteristic of the Church today. “The year of the Lord’s judgment,” maybe... “The year of the Lord’s disapproval,” maybe... but not “*the year of the Lord’s favor*.” Until the Church learns to experience God’s favor, more in our own, personal lives, as well as in our corporate experience, we will never be able to speak that word to a world that is crumpling under the withering heat of God’s supposed scorn.

If the church is not known for joy, if we do not feel it, individually, maybe it is because we have turned our backs on Jesus’ own calling. Writer, Doris Donnelly, has this word of encouragement:

Maybe we need to redress the balance of somberness by gladdening others with support, kind words, encouragement, laughter, hope, time, and the simple gift of self. It wouldn’t hurt. It could heal. And it would point to that kingdom first heralded by angels who proclaimed the “*good tidings of great joy*” that went hand in hand with “*peace on earth*.”⁴

⁴ Donnelly, p.11

Though I'm sure we as a congregation have "miles to go before we sleep,"⁵ I am glad to be a part of a church that in many ways is sharing in Jesus' own convictions. Let us ever be mindful of the ways we might improve our work. If you get tired of this conversation, tired of asking, "Is there more we should be doing?" I do not apologize. The scripture reminds us, who have been given so much, *let us not be weary in well-doing* (Galatians 6.9). But I do wonder how well we express this joy? Do you feel it, personally?

Do others, especially those who visit with us for the first time, feel the joy that this congregation share in so many ways? Is the word "joy" characteristic of our life? Our worship?

On the afternoon of Palm Sunday, our choir member joined voices with the choir from First Baptist Church, West, for our now-annual choir festival. I was privileged to be able to sing in that wonderful concert. It was a wonderful concert of music, classical and gospel. But let me tell you the best part. It was not that we were together, again, working on an ongoing relationship with an African-American church in our city – as important as that is. It was not that this was another occasion for me to deepen my personal relationship with Dr. Ricky Woods, their pastor. It was not that I was singing gospel music again – which takes me back to my days in the Gospel Ensemble at Furman University. The best thing about that concert was that I was able to stand in the choir loft and look into your faces as we sang. Do you know what I saw? What I saw, in a way that I seldom see from this vantage? I saw joy. It really looked like joy! That very word came to mind when my eyes swept over this crowd. From old to young, from traditionalists to a more contemporary crowd, in your faces, I saw joy.

Doris Donnelly says,

⁵ From Robert Frost's poem, "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening."

Joy... is not the sentiment of people who have lost their marbles and their hold on reality. (It's not just being "happy.") Nor is [joy] a pious wish, but rather a permanent, all-pervasive character of the Christian, irrepressibly active, filled with inward satisfaction and outgoing benediction."⁶

In all that we do as individual followers of Jesus. In all that we do as a church committed to his cause, we must look for joy, and we must find ways to know it in our hearts and to share it with our outward expressions. In the world, there is enough to fear. Enough sadness. Enough anger and loneliness. But faith brings joy – maybe, as Jesus said in that text – because we know what is coming to pass. And it is such joy, especially in the face of fear and sadness and heart-break and bondage that says...

Maybe we should dance!

May it be so.

⁶ Doris Donnelly, p.10.