

**The Dance of Discipleship | 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b- 19 | 12 July 2009 | Dan McCoig**

1.

Here is a disclaimer on the use of dance as a metaphor for Christian discipleship. I married a dancer whose mother [Rockette at Radio City in the 1950s] and sister are dancers.

Our daughter is a dancer.

Believe it or not, I donned a pair of tights and took a modern dance class in college.

It was not pretty.

And, as the final rounds approach our household's television is tuned to *Dancing with the Stars*.

Also, we have watched more than several broadcasts of *So You Think You Can Dance?*

Apparently, there is something of a dance sensation sweeping the nation at present.

Out of curiosity, I did a little research to see if Americans were simply watching others dance or were perhaps getting up off of the sofa and trying a few steps for themselves.

What I discovered was dance studios are seeing the largest percentage increase in students in more than a decade.

Some studios have increases of nearly 40 percent.

2.

In today's lesson from Samuel, dance plays a prominent role.

Not only is King David dancing in the streets of Jerusalem, he is doing so in what amounts to his birthday suit.

Let's set the stage.

David and his people are bringing the ark of God to Jerusalem.

The procession is quite lively.

The writer of Samuel reports that not only are they dancing, but that they are dancing with all their might to the sounds of human voices, lyres, harps, tambourines, castanets, and cymbals.

This is joyful worship at its most exuberant.

Author and commentator Frederick Buechner writes:

*David and God were whirling around before the ark in such passion that they caught fire from each other and blazed up in a single flame of magnificence. Not even the scolding that David got afterward from his wife Michal could dim the dance's glory.*

David's dance epitomizes the very word enthusiasm.

The word enthusiasm – en theos – literally means "in God."

David's first wife, Michal – the daughter of Saul, David's rival for the throne and Israel's first king – hates the dance and makes sure everyone knows it.

The dance feels awkward for her.

It's embarrassing.

It's inappropriate.

She probably wonders why David can't behave himself, why he can't behave as a monarch should.

The writer of Samuel goes so far as to say that Michal despises David in her heart.

3.

Michal is not an unsympathetic character.

She wasn't evil.

She just didn't quite know what to do with David's enthusiasm, his "in-God" behavior.

I am somewhat reminded of myself on my first visit to Ethiopia.

Unaccustomed as I was to rhythmic movement in worship, I didn't quite know what to make of it.

Ethiopian Christians can be known for dancing in worship as an expression of celebration for the liberation and joy they have experienced in the Lord Jesus Christ. It's not that I am not happy for what God has done in my life, it's that given my Scots heritage the most I can muster is a tapping of my foot.

By the way, when I took modern dance in college I discovered that I was fond of Paul Taylor.

Taylor was an innovative American dancer and choreographer.

He once performed a modern dance solo in which he stood motionless on stage for four minutes.

A clever dance critic responded with the perfect review – four inches of white space in his newspaper column.

He wrote nothing about nothing.

I wonder if the metaphorical dancing we do in church isn't similar to Paul Taylor's solo. In other words, we stand still.

No movement.

I fully appreciate that worship in the Presbyterian Christian tradition is first and foremost an occasion that engages the mind.

We look at words, we read words, we listen to words, we sing words.

All of this requires us to engage our minds in a significant way.

I believe that Michal, David's wife, would approve of such worship.

Now, I am not advocating dance in worship though I am by no means against it either.

That's not really the issue.

The issue involves enthusiasm – the “in God” dimension of worship.

How do we – really, how do I – move through the awkward feelings, the embarrassment, my narrow sense of what is appropriate and what is inappropriate that has the tendency to curb rather than foster enthusiasm, in-Godness, not only in worship but in every other area of service to God.

Christians, more so than anyone else, should be enthusiastic people.

We should be in-God people.

4.

So, how do we get back into God?

How do we rekindle our enthusiasm?

Let me suggest a place to start.

Consider the elements that make a great dancer great.

As a 15-year veteran of dance recitals I have noticed a few things.

There are at least four main components and countless others as well.

But, I'll keep it to four.

They are teamwork, breathing, studying, and a willingness to have fun.

First, teamwork.

In a journal article, dancer Janet Neumann makes the point that “square dancing can really work only when there is teamwork.”

I believe that the same is true of our service to God.

Notice that King David didn't perform a solo in front of the ark, but “David and *all the house of Israel* were dancing before the Lord” (v. 5, italics added).

That's teamwork, and it's essential to real success — whether you're dancing in a group, singing in a choir, building a Habitat for Humanity house or participating in a small-group Bible study.

When we are working as a team, there is very little chance of awkwardness or embarrassment.

In 2 Samuel, the only one who despises David is Michal — and notice that she is all alone, looking out her window, outside the circle of dancers.

Second, breathing.

Ballet dancers will tell you that breathing is an essential part of dance and that you'll never make it through a performance unless you learn how to breathe.

Hold your breath and you'll tire out quickly because your muscles won't get the oxygen they need.

As Christians, we need the breath of God to fill us if we're going to do the work that God wants us to do.

Remember that Adam was lifeless until the Lord "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (Genesis 2:7), and the people of Israel were dead bones until "the breath came into them, and they lived" (Ezekiel 37:10).

In the same way, we cannot serve God well unless we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit and breathe deeply in prayer.

It is only when we ask for the Lord to fill us that we will be inspired — a word that means "to breathe into" or "fill with spirit."

David was breathing deeply as he "danced before the Lord with all his might" (v. 14), and God gave him the energy to bring the ark all the way from Baale-judah to Jerusalem.

Third, study or practice.

As everyone knows, there are good dances and bad ones.

But to discover the difference, we have to study.

In Mark 6, the gospel writer tells the story of how a certain dance was used not to praise God but to put John the Baptist to death.

King Herod throws himself a birthday party, and he is so pleased by the dance of his daughter Salome that he says to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it" (Mark 6:22).

After consulting with her mother, the little girl rushes back to Herod and requests, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter" (v. 25).

Herod is deeply grieved by this request, yet he doesn't want to refuse the girl.

He loses his head while watching the beautiful dance, and now — to keep a promise — John the Baptist is going to have to lose his, literally.

So Herod sends a soldier of the guard, and in short order John is killed and his head is placed on a platter for the girl and her mother (vv. 26-28).

So the question "Shall we dance?" cannot be answered with an easy yes or no.

Study of Scripture reveals that dance is good if it's truly enthusiastic, truly "in God."

Our Lord certainly wants us to feel passion, as David did, and to be willing to "lose it" in joyful praise and thanksgiving.

King David was God-centered, and his dance was heavenly.

King Herod was human-centered, and his daughter's dance created hell on earth.

The critical choice is to keep God at the center of whatever we say, think, do and feel.

And four, have fun.

We cannot dance well unless we are willing to cut loose and have some fun, and the same is true in lives of Christian discipleship.

"As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you," says Jesus to his disciples.

"I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:9, 11).

As people who are secure in the love of Christ, we can step out in faith and have some fun — Jesus wants our joy to be complete.

We don't have to worry about being superhuman and saving the world because we serve a Savior who has already saved the world.

So cut loose.

Share the love.

Feel the joy.

By combining teamwork, good breathing, careful study and a willingness to have fun, we'll be able to serve the Lord with the enthusiasm of King David before the ark. We'll be *en theos*, "in God."  
Amen.