

Learning to Dance

2 Samuel 6: 12-22 Mark 6: 14-29

Dance is a wonderful means of artistic expression. Dance is expressive like a painting or a sculpture, like a play or a poem, like a skyscraper or a story, but it is flowing movement, passionate stretches of physical aptitude, and the emotional rapture of life's loves and losses, and much, much more. But what is the dance about? What is it expressing or seeking to accomplish?

When you watch the old Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire movies, the dancing is remarkable, joyous, graceful, and energetic, but it's clear that the two are meant to be seen together, dancing both for and with the other, sharing delight in what they can do together as one showcases the other.

Fast forward to the movie "Dirty Dancing" with Patrick Swayze and Jennifer Grey, and it's another kind of love story that gets its full expression in the deep connection to each in their dance. And isn't 1987 rather cute – *Dirty Dancing*? Isn't that adorable?

Professional dancers are schooled in the Graham Technique, named for Martha Graham whose influence has commanded and defined the world of modern dance with its unique movement. One commenter wrote of Graham's style: *[W]heeling turns, off-center jumps, terrific falls, bodies spiraling to the floor and then surging upward again....* Her technique in simple terms is known as "contraction and release," bringing bold and passionate expressions to the art form.

A reviewer of her choreographic style wrote: *Frequently the vividness and intensity of her purpose are so potent that, on the rise of the curtain, they strike like a blow, and in that moment one must decide whether he is for or against her. She boils down her moods and movements until they are devoid of all extraneous substances and are concentrated to the highest degree.*

Our two scripture lessons obviously have dancers with stories to tell and lessons to be learned.

Starting with the account in Mark 6, we have a strange detour that departs from the Jesus narrative and takes a step back to explain John the Baptist's death. The whole story is a bit dubious since we have the account of 1st century Jewish historian Josephus which runs like this:

Herod had John put to death, though he was a good man and had exhorted Jews to lead righteous lives, to practice justice toward their fellows and piety toward God, and so doing join in baptism When others too joined the crowds about him, because they were aroused to the highest degree by his words, Herod became alarmed. Eloquence that had so great an effect on the people might lead to some sort of sedition, for it looked as if they would be guided by John in

everything they did. Herod decided, therefore, that it would be much better to strike first and be rid of him before his work led to an uprising, than to wait for an upheaval, get involved in a difficult situation, and see his mistake. (Ant. XVIII, v, 2)

That version of history from Josephus doesn't square too well with the gospel version, but it does make great sense, and makes particular sense since we can see a reflection of Jesus' story in Josephus's remarks as well. It all sounds quite political.

But let's be clear that the version in Mark is totally political, too. Mark's version may be a bit doubtful, but it's still a story that reflects **what the reader of the gospel of Jesus Christ needed to be aware of**. It must be important since it interrupts Mark's breakneck account all about Jesus, not about John.

The hook is that hearing reports about Jesus reminds King Herod about John the Baptist whom he had met already and executed. So, as Herod considers this account about Jesus, a thought bubble appeared over his head as he strokes his beard. Inside the thought bubble is an instant replay video of his memory of his experiences with John the Baptist. Cue the music as he drifts off into the memory.

John the Baptist had publicly denounced Herod for his marriage of his dead brother's wife Herodias. Since marriages were all about international alliances and keeping families and clans in line, while maintaining good relations as well as good defenses among bordering states, royal marriage was complex and couldn't be concerned with the persnickety details of Jewish law or moral codes of any kind. This was business, politics, and power; religious and ethical values were not to infringe.

Herod is remembering, remembering ... his new wife Herodias loathed John the Baptist and wanted him dead. But Herod thought of himself as a man of the world, and was a builder of great structures, a philosopher and a man of knowledge in the contemporary Hellenistic ideal, yet with the ancient legacy of Judaism as part of his identity as well. Naturally, he engaged in conversation with John the Baptist himself, and found him to be quite impressive. According to the gospel account, Herod liked John the Baptist and didn't want to harm him, but also couldn't afford to release him.

Herod is remembering, remembering ... his birthday party. What a big time! More food than a Fairfield Presbyterian pot luck, and then the king's daughter dances for Herod the King. Herod is so delighted (and a little tipsy) that he slobbers, 'Honey, that was faaantastic. I mean faayantastic. It was so wonderful that you can have anything you want. Just name it and it's yours, up to half the kingdom!' It was rather a reckless promise to make which is why I believe we were in the advanced stages of wine consumption. He has made a God-like promise for which he might easily come to regret, but that pretty little thing dancing like that was just so enchanting, why not promise everything? In his stupor, he figured he was the king, it's good to be the king, and he could deliver on any request she might make.

Daughter asks Mom what to do with this unexpected boon, and Mom sees the opportunity to gain the death of John the Baptist fulfilled. The request for his head on a platter brought Herod up short, and he realized he was trapped by the expectations of his own promise, the expectations of his distinguished guests, the expectations of his high office. He could not lose face, and Herod was forced to follow through.

For Mark, the story spells out how John died, beheaded within a memorable story, **not** like Jesus by crucifixion. It also was not because of anything John said supposedly, but because of palace intrigues. These help to separate John the Baptist as a character in the drama of 1st century Palestine from the figure of Jesus the Messiah.

Further, the triangular relationship of John, Herod and Herodias is also reminiscent of the prophet Elijah's struggle with Jezebel and Ahab, an effective link since Mark's gospel wants John the Baptist portrayed as Elijah, the forerunner of the messiah of God. The story works nicely to cement that impression.

It also describes the hubris of the wealthy, well-connected, and ruling class, something already well known and the subject of many stories. We hear the king talk and promise as any king might, but arrogantly assuming the role and responsibility of God. The lesson comes in the hubris, arrogance, and faithlessness of the worldly. When the choice is between life and death, the weakling decision here is for death. The human actor overreaches and exposes their true weakness and frailty. The human actor fails whenever they try to play the role of God. The consequences are tragic, and the worst gets realized.

Tragic death is in the background of the story from Second Samuel about King David and the Ark of the Covenant being brought into David's royal city, Jerusalem. In a scene of worldly celebration which makes no account of God, the message gets summed up in the actions of one poor individual, Obed-edom, who tries to save the Ark of God in the midst of the self-aggrandizing gala. As the Ark seems to slip off its place, Obed-edom reaches out and grabs it to save it, and gets struck dead by God. Everything stops and the Ark is parked as King David is stunned that this fatal act of God has occurred, shaken that all of his assumptions about his success, his victories, his honor, his moment of glory have suddenly unraveled in tragedy.

Our scripture today picks up the story as King David returns, ready now to bring the Ark of God into his city, but with a very different approach. It says that the Ark had only gone six steps when David humbled himself and offered sacrifices to honor God, recognizing and honoring the source of all of his achievements.

David is also adorned differently, not in the regalia of the champion warrior and victorious king. Now he wears only a linen ephod. Frankly we don't know what a linen ephod is, but likely not much of a garment for someone engaged in strenuous dancing which is what David was now doing, dancing before the Lord, dancing before the true King, God the King of all creation.

We find things out from the late King Saul's daughter, Michal, who is observing the whole thing from her palace window. She sees David's dancing before the Lord God and it says, *She despised him in her heart.*

The Ark is set in its place inside the city. David once again makes sacrifices to God, and blesses the people in the name of the Lord God, as well as sharing food with everyone there so that **all** might share the joy of the event, not just an elite few at a private party – **all** of God's people are to know their blessing from this God through the actions of their king.

Michal comes and berates David for what she sees as his undignified behavior in the procession, and having exposed himself to mere servants, presumably by wearing only that linen ephod. But David fires right back, insisting on the righteousness of honoring God and making sure that all praise and honor was directed to God. If that meant appearing as a servant himself, casting aside propriety to turn the focus on God's blessing to his people, so be it. In a reflection of the *reversal we should expect* in the kingdom of God, David says:

I will make myself even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes; but by the slave girls of whom you've spoken, by them I shall be held in honor.

For this dance lesson, we learn the opposite, that the dance which is directed in the truest spirit to God, which humbles oneself before God, and which directs all praise to God on behalf of God's people, that is the dance of joy and peace, of new life and great blessing. Humility as a servant before God is the proper role for any of the faithful, but particularly a leader among God's people.

God wants us to dance, if not in body then certainly in spirit. God wants to bring us joy and peace. God wants our dancing to the beat of serving sisters and brothers, celebrating all the members of the family of God, giving thanks by giving hope and new life. God wants blessings for all of God's people. God wants a dance partner, and that's you and me and all the brothers and sisters in God's world. Put on your linen ephod (at least!) and dance to the Lord this week.