

Pentecost 6B, Proper 15

Lections: 2 Sam. 6:1-5,12b-19; Ps. 24; Eph. 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

One of the common elements in the Hebrew scriptures and the gospel today is dance. I spent some time this week talking to dancers and watching a variety of dancers on the web – videos on YouTube and the popular television program, “So you think you can dance.” Whether it was a retrospective on Michael Jackson’s dance innovations or a contest for best first dance for wedding couples it would be hard to dismiss such an art form with all of its variations. Elements of disciplined practice, great music and the wonder of the human body were a joy to behold. The parish sacred dance group offers us the same inspiration. We know that aboriginal sun-dancers and a variety of other ethnic and cultural groups maintain and pass on their history through dance. Perhaps you remembered that David danced his faith, his passion for God.

Frederick Buechner in his book, Peculiar Treasures, speaks about this scene in our first lesson. “To see what there was about David that made Israel adore him like no other king she ever had, as good a place as any to look is the account of how he captured Jerusalem and moved in the ark. Jerusalem was a major plum for the new young king, a hill town considered untakeable...just to remind people who it was that had nevertheless finally taken it, David’s first move was to change its name to the city of David. His second move was a brilliant maneuver for giving his victory the divine stamp of approval...he had the ark loaded onto a custom built cart and made a regular circus parade of it complete with horns, harps, cymbals, and psalteries, not to mention himself high-stepping out front like the mayor of Dublin on St. Patrick’s Day. When they finally made it into town he set up a big tent to keep out the weather, had refreshments passed around on the house, and , just so nobody would forget who was picking up the tab, did the lion’s share of praying himself and personally took up the collection afterwards...the next thing was something else again. With everyone looking on, including his wife, he did a dance...for once he didn’t have to drag God in for politics’ sake because it was obvious to everyone that God was there...David and Yahweh whirling around the ark in such a passion that they caught fire from each other and blazed up in a single flame of such magnificence that not even the dressing down David got from Michal afterwards could dim the glory of it. He had feet of clay like the rest of us if not more so – self-serving and deceitful, lustful and vain – but on the basis of that dance alone, you can see why it was David more than anybody else that Israel lost her heart to...” (pp.22-24). David danced his passion for God; he embodied joy and all saw something amazing.

I love watching dance – movies like A Chorus Line, Flashdance, Riverdance, West Side Story, Alvin Ailey’s Resurrection and classical ballet. I am amazed at hip-hop and will not tell you of my early lessons in tap and ballet including being part of a fountain. I understand why people imitated Michael Jackson (who was buried this week); perhaps when dancing it was one time when he was truly free and his best self. Martha Graham who was a major dancer and choreographer from New York City described herself as an athlete for God. This quote is from a longer essay she wrote which can be accessed on the web as well from a series entitled, “This I Believe.” She wrote, “ The body is a barometer telling the state of the soul’s weather to all who can read it...the instrument through

which the dance speaks is also the instrument through which life is lived: the human body.”

Salome danced for her step-father at his party. She must have been quite good at it because Herod promised her quite a bit – even half of his kingdom. Not wanting that, she asked her mother for advice. Herodias had a dispute with the prophet John and so, seeking to rid herself of his troublesome truth-telling, she tells her daughter what to say. And the rest, they say, is history. It was not the fault of the dancer but the manipulation of that gift for another’s gain that should leave a bad taste in our mouths. Here the gospel gives us a hint of what lies ahead for Jesus – opposition that will prove deadly for the Lord of the Dance. Maybe then and there he decided that dance led to trouble or that hanging around with folks who didn’t get the passion for God thing would turn away. I don’t know.

What I do know is that we learn by practice. “Whether it means to learn to dance by practicing dancing or to learn to live by practicing living, the practices are the same.” We learn to pray by practicing prayer. We learn community by practicing community. We learn to sing, to have faith, to be transformed by practicing. “It is the performance of a dedicated precise set of acts, physical or intellectual, from which comes the shape of achievement, the sense of one’s being, the satisfaction of the spirit. One becomes in some arena an athlete of God. Practice means to perform over and over again in the face of all obstacles, some act of vision, of faith, of desire. Practice is a means of inviting the perfection desired.” (Martha Graham).

Faith is a dance of practice, of partnering with God. It requires all the passion and discipline of David to allow God to be with us in our bodies. It requires that we acknowledge joy and sorrow. “A rabbi told his people that if they studied the Torah it would put scripture on their hearts. One of them asked, ‘why on our hearts and not in them..’ The rabbi answered, ‘only God can put scripture inside. But reading the sacred text can put it on your hearts and then when your hearts break, the holy words will fall inside.’” I believe that the exercise of joy and gratitude in the dance of life is also soul work. There is a video on the web of ‘the gratitude dance.’ Captured in young and old all over the world – in Istanbul, in China, along the Appalachian Trail, under the water in an ocean, people release in their bodies an expression of joy. I recommend it to you. I would do a little gratitude dance here myself today, being glad that a grandchild is free of cancer, but I would embarrass myself and you. However, I did do a little two-step when the good news phone call arrived.

Nietzsche once said, “I would only believe in a God who knows how to dance.” Amen to that. +

The Rev. Dr. Linda Privitera