
Come Dance with Me

A sermon by Canon Beth Knowlton

On May 1, 1933, during the Great Depression, a newspaper called the Catholic Worker published its first issue to raise awareness of the plight of the poor and to affirm the dignity of every human person. Over time the Catholic Worker movement became well known for its houses of hospitality, communities where people live with one another committed to nonviolence, voluntary poverty, prayer, and hospitality for the homeless, exiled, hungry, and forsaken. While the 227 communities still engaged in this work speak to a legacy long beyond its founding, it is also a story of deep friendship between Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, its two founders.

Dorothy Day describes the night of their first meeting. She says, “I had come from an assignment for The Commonweal, covering the communist inspired ‘hunger march’ of the unemployed to Washington. I had prayed at the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception that I might find something to do in the social order besides reporting the conditions I observed. I wanted to change them, not just report them, but I had lost faith in revolution. I wanted to love my enemy, whether capitalist or Communist. I certainly did not realize at first that I had my answer in Peter Maurin. I was thirty five years old, and I had met plenty of radicals in my time and plenty of crackpots, too; people who had blueprints to change the social order were a dime a dozen around Union Square.”¹

Dorothy Day had been a Catholic for only four years, and Peter, twenty years her senior, was the one who pushed her through their conversations to deepen her grounding in Catholic theology and to become a journalist who could articulate the concerns of the poor. It was he who pushed her to publish a newspaper and continued to challenge her and the movement when he thought they had lost their grounding or purpose. She said of him, “Peter was a revelation to me, she said, “I do know this—that when people come into contact with Peter...they change, they awaken, they begin to see, things become new, they look at life in the light of the Gospels. They admit the truth he possesses and lives by, and though themselves fail to go the whole way, their faces are turned at least towards the light.”²

So, I have a question for you this morning. Who has been your Peter? Who has called you to see things anew?

Today is Trinity Sunday, a feast day dedicated to a doctrine that can seem remote and not terribly relevant to our daily lives. But the longer I live in Christian community, the more I see the trinity as an embodied practice that deeply shapes our experience of God. We cannot be fathers without children, children without mothers, any more than we can be created in the image of God, without God. We find in the Trinity an invitation. An invitation not to intellectualize God, because I challenge you to find a fully satisfactory intellectual explanation of the Trinity, and I have looked! But it is an invitation to join a dance that began long before us and will continue long after us.

Last week we celebrated the gift of the Holy Spirit in Pentecost. Today we are reminded that this was grounded in the gift of our creation. It continues in the gift of community. And when we hear the great commission in Matthew, we are reminded that this gift is one that is meant to be taken out beyond what we know and shared with abandon.

By now, most of you know I have accepted a call to leave this place and become the rector of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in San Antonio, Texas. While this is not my last Sunday or even my last sermon in this pulpit, the leave taking has begun in earnest. And while difficult at times, it is grace filled and holy. Over and over again in conversation, dear notes that people

have taken the time to write, and meals we are sharing I cannot forget how deeply formative the past eight years have been for me. As we have begun to say goodbye, it has surprisingly not been a time of disconnection, but one of reminding ourselves of the connections we have forged. We are taking the time to remember, so that when we part it is with each other deeply and firmly embedded in the heart.

To remember is a deeply Christian practice and is what we do each Sunday when we gather around the altar for a holy meal. We connect ourselves to the deeper Christian story and remind ourselves who we are when gather with one another. We remind ourselves whose we are as well. And at its best, it is a dance that requires no words.

A number of years ago on Christmas Eve I had what in some ways is one of the funniest experiences of my liturgical life. But as I continue to remember it, while still funny, it has transcended the humor of that moment and become an icon to the dance I think we are invited to by God.

Bishop Alexander was celebrating that year, and Canon Maxwell and I were serving as deacons. I admit I was a bit overcome with the beauty of the service and so not necessarily very quick to pick up the cues my friend was desperately trying to send. When I looked across the chancel to Canon Maxwell as he set the table, I saw him mouth the words “no wine.” I nodded, assuming he meant that somehow one of the two very large flagons that had been brought forward was empty.

So I did nothing.

Not to worry I thought, we can fill the second one later and just send the first back to the chapel. As I continued to watch him though, it became clear that there was in fact NO wine in either container, and we were confronted with the prospect of serving communion to well over a thousand people with one chalice of wine. We were in need of a miracle on the order of the wedding at Cana of Galilee.

But this is when the dance began.

The Bishop censed the altar, the music was playing, and with as much casualness as one could muster in that situation I discreetly removed one of the empty flagons and handed it behind my back to our Chief Verger, Richard Perry. I did not say a word. As the Bishop continued to gather us at the altar, it was a bit into the liturgy, when I simply reached my hand behind me, a fully filled flagon of wine was placed there and I was able to set it on the table before the Bishop needed to consecrate it.

Most people never knew what had happened. Because at that point we had moved from thinking about the steps, to dancing. We knew each other well enough that we were able to improvise in the midst of confusion and turn a funny situation into a moment of holiness and connection.

This dance is one that takes place each day in Christian community. Most of the time it is not in worship, but when we find ourselves called to improvise and move beyond steps to join one another in relationship.

We dance when we make the choice to let go of deeply held wounds and reconcile with one another. We dance when we come to love those in our midst whom we initially dislike. We dance when we choose to laugh instead of becoming angry. We dance when we gather around someone we love who is sick. We dance when we serve the poor or build a Habitat House in places that make us uncomfortable.

If God is somehow three persons in unity with itself, it can only be a dance with choreography that is moving and changing in each moment, yet remaining constant. We are invited, perhaps even commanded, to participate and to join with one another here on earth. It may be easy to miss the unity as our dance partners change, but it is never lost in the dance of God. When we start to glimpse that, even for a moment, we cannot help but be transformed. Because we know that these relationships we are called to are sheer gratuitous gift of the God who knows that separation is not possible in the dance of holy grace. It is what Christ reminds his dearest friends when he tells them, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

As I close I can do no better than our Epistle lesson assigned for today. St. Paul says, “Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell.

Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

Amen.

1. Day, Dorothy. "Peter Maurin 1877-1977". *The Catholic Worker*, May 1977, 1, 9. *The Catholic Worker Movement*.
<http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday>

2. Ibid.

© The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.