
Dance As If Jesus Was Watching

A sermon by Canon George Maxwell
Proper 9 – Year A

I really don't like going to the mall. I don't like anything about it. I don't like the crowds, I don't like the smells, and I don't like the noise.

I actually went six weeks without a watch just because I didn't want to go to the mall to get the battery replaced.

Sometimes, though, you just have to face the music. So, I went to the mall. I dropped off my watch and, when the jeweler couldn't get to it right away, I girded my loins and walked out into the main level.

As I fought through the crowd, trying my best not to smell the smells or hear the noises, I looked up and found myself right next to Dance Dance Revolution. Do you know what this is? It's life-sized video game with a video screen and a dance stage. To play, you stand on the stage, wait for colored arrows to appear at your feet, and start dancing.

Still working my way through the crowd, I noticed that the guy on stage was ... well ... way too old to be on that stage. He was wearing tight black pants and a well-tailored black and white shirt. His hands were waving in the air. His hips were thrusting. His feet were pumping.

It was embarrassing!

I mean, I was embarrassed for him!

I was just about even with the stage when the music came to an end. There was no applause. No one even seemed to notice.

But, the dancer ... he was beaming.

I'd never seen such a smile. I'd never seen a body so obviously free. I'd never seen anymore more fully alive.

I felt an unexpected rush of emotion. I thought, "I want a world where that guy can dance like that. I want a world where we all can learn to dance like that!"

Some things are easy to say and hard to do. Who gave him permission to dance like that? Where would the rest of us ever learn to dance like that?

Maybe it's as easy as letting go of our inhibitions, following the passions, and doing whatever we feel in the moment.

Maybe it's like that song from the 1980s, "Come from the Heart."

You got to sing like you don't need the money
Love like you'll never get hurt.
You got to dance like nobody's watchin'
It's gotta come from the heart

If you want it to work

Maybe that's it. Maybe we just need to let our inhibitions fly away and follow our feelings. Maybe we already know how to dance and removing the obstacles we create for ourselves is all we need to do to build the world we want.

When I think about the dancing man's face, though, it wasn't just relief that he was feeling. It wasn't just a release of awkward energy. He seemed to be in touch with something else, something beautiful.

Jesus is trying to tell us about that "something else" in our gospel passage today. Remember the admonition, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance."

Jesus knows that everyone is not hearing him. He has just challenged the religious authorities on their interpretation of the prohibitions against activity on the Sabbath. They are already doing what plotting authorities do. Rather than meeting his argument, they are attacking his character. They are calling him "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners."

Now I get how difficult it is to throw off the yoke of the desire to be perfect. And, I get how hard it is to throw off the yoke of the desire to control how everybody else feels about you. Trust me, I get it.

But Jesus is saying more than that. He is calling us to more than a life without rules or emotional burdens. He is calling us to a life of love.

The flute is an image pulled from a wedding celebration. The bond and covenant of marriage is often used as a symbol for the mystery of the union between Christ and his Church.

The music of the flute is a call to dance in celebration of the fact that we are loved and, with God's help, can learn how to love others.

The "something else" that Jesus is trying to tell us about is love.

The 14th century mystic Julian of Norwich said it best, I think, when she said,

Do you wish to know your Lord's meaning in this thing?

Know it well. Love was his meaning.

Who reveals it to you? Love.

What did he reveal to you? Love.

Why does he reveal it to you? Love.

It's not just about getting rid of our inhibitions or following our feelings or even being in the moment.

It's about learning how to love, which I think we do when we know that we *are* loved.

I saw a documentary not too long ago about a dance theater in Australia. The documentary is titled *Stepping Out*. The dance troupe is made up of participants who are intellectually and sometimes emotionally and often physically challenged. The purpose of the troupe is to teach them to dance.

The documentary lets you watch this learning process. It is an intimate process. The leader teaches the students by showing them what to do. First, they learn how to breathe, how to quiet themselves. Then, they learn how to move their bodies and how to connect the movements. They learn how to take risks and how to stumble. They learn how to recognize what grace feels like and how to call it from their bodies.

You see these bodies that have for so long felt like a burdensome yoke suddenly come alive. They're dancing with smiles on their faces. They are so obviously free. It would be hard to find anyone more fully alive.

Madame Butterfly was as good as it gets!

Love is the "something else" Jesus is talking about and this is what it looks like.

The teacher loved these dancers. She taught them how to breathe. She taught them how to move. She gave them confidence in themselves.

She taught them how to dance and, when the time came for their performance, they were the embodiment of grace.

And that, I think, is something that the dancing man on Dance Dance Revolution somehow knew.

How do we build a world where we can all learn to dance like that?

We can start by learning that you don't have to dance well to get God's love.

God loves you so that you can learn how to dance well.

The key is not to dance like nobody's watchin'.

The key is to dance like Jesus is watching and delighting in your every movement!

Amen.