



“Something to Dance About”

Texts: 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19, Ephesians 1:3-14

a sermon by the Rev. Anna von Winckler

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As you know, I have lived in many places abroad. Travel, especially international travel, is a passion of mine. One of the things that I have enjoyed in my travels is visiting churches. I've visited orthodox churches in Middle East with the heavy use of incense, candles, and lots of chanting, international churches that blended different traditions, and African churches with their enthusiastic singing and dancing. I've attended various black churches where they freely express agreement with the sermons with hardy Amens. I've attended and visited two Methodist churches where the contemporary service was very contemporary and the music director was just as active in speaking and leading prayers as the pastor was. But I've spent the most time abroad in African churches, of course. I loved the singing and the dancing, the freedom they felt to worship with all of their being to the beat of the drums. While I loved it most of the time, there were times when I missed the traditional hymns sung to the beautiful sound of the organ that we Presbyterians know and love. I especially missed the hymns around Christmas and Easter. But the same can be said when I returned to the States. I became nostalgic for the easy way of worshipping in the African churches.

As a pastor I've thought a lot about worship over the years. How it seems that in our traditional form of worship can become so rote. I remember sitting where you are, in the pews, one Sunday and at the end of the service realizing that I had pretty much run on remote control. The sameness of the liturgy, the order of worship, while in many ways there is comfort in that, there can also be a kind of death in it as well if it doesn't lead us to a deeper sense of the divine.

Do we come expecting to encounter the Lord through the service? And if so, do you expect to be filled with the Joy of the Lord? What I've always loved about this passage from Samuel is that David danced before the Lord. He was so overcome with Joy to be able to bring the Ark of the Covenant back to Jerusalem that he danced with joy before the Lord. They had been kept safe in their endeavor to return the Ark and now that moment that they had struggled to accomplish was happening. God had allowed them to prevail and David was ecstatic.

When was the last time you danced before the Lord? That your joy of being in God's presence was so overwhelming, that you let loose, swaying, dancing, lifting your arms in praise? When was the last time you were so grateful to God that Joy and thankfulness filled you to the point of bursting into song? We are always so self-conscious, especially we staid Presbyterians. But David wasn't thinking about what other people were thinking. He wasn't thinking whether this was a proper way to worship God. He was just responding to the joy he felt within.

Such emotional expression may be more common among our charismatic and Pentecostal sisters and brothers, but for many mainline traditions, demonstrations of joy would be frowned upon. Is it because we have allowed culture to shape how we worship God, rather than letting the presence of God shape our worship? Why do we allow socially constructed customs, and traditions to influence how we come before the Lord? Worse, what occurs when we begin to believe that our particular style of worship is closer to truth than some other groups worship style?

I am not calling for all churches to incorporate dancing, though the church that I grew up in at one point incorporated liturgical dance into its service on special occasions, I am cautioning against prohibiting, a form of joyful expression, less we find ourselves in the company of Saul's daughter, Michal.

Our cultural need to control events all too often stifles the very presence of God from being manifested. Sometimes congregations prohibit expressions of joy - dancing, drumming, guitars, modern music, and so forth - as if their inclusion somehow violated God's will. Our churches would be revolutionized if we were to allow God's people to worship freely, without restraints.

Worship won't always feel joyful, overall, when the theme of the sermon is on one of the heavier topics that God wants us to think about and take action on, like social action. We must never forget the needs of the poor and the disenfranchised. But there should always be elements of joy, like in the gathering as we join our hearts in prayer with God's heart, and as we sing our gratitude for all the blessings that God has bestowed upon us over the past week. On Communion Sundays the liturgy often reminds us that this is the joyful feast of the people of God, but do we come with joy? Being able to recognize God's blessings in the day to day things is the first step in joyful worship.

But there is always that second aspect of worship that we too often don't put on the forefront of what we should be doing with our time and that is worship is active and serving God, doing the work of Christ, is the second part of worship that we should always be involved in. The scripture tells us that once the rejoicing ended, King David distributed to each, a loaf of bread, a portion of dates, and a cake of raisins. Worship - no matter how joyful and free it may be - absent action is a tepid worship at best. King David, the richest, most powerful man in the land, understood. He had an obligation to those around him. Like Jesus, centuries later, he fed the multitudes. While not everyone in the crowd was poor, no doubt many were. The food provided needed nourishment, so they could continue serving and worshiping God. We need to care for one another so that we're able to care for those beyond our family.

King David, during the procession that brought God's ark to Jerusalem, sacrificed an ox and the fat sheep every six steps. That was part of the worship, blood sacrifices. But we know that all changed, not just when Jesus came, but even before. God, according to the prophet Isaiah, is revolted by such blood sacrifices. What is true worship then according to Isaiah, is to cease to do evil and instead to combat evil, to work for justice, help the oppressed, and plead for those who disenfranchised.

Dancing before God may provide space for a deep spiritual connection with the author of the universe, and creative expression in worship allows us to connect with the Divine in a more intimate way, but true worship goes further as we seek justice, as we physically - not solely spiritually - feed the hungry. There is something theologically wrong if we ignore the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the alien, the incarcerated, and the infirm. Creative worship expressions provide a sense of closeness to God, which is important; but only when we touch those we are called to minister to, do we touch God.

So, let us not be like Michal, who dismissed David's joyful expression before the Lord. Let us not allow cultural norms or traditions to dictate how we come before God. Let us not limit our worship to a set order or style, but rather allow the presence of God to shape our worship. And let us remember that true worship is not just about dancing or singing, but about seeking justice, helping the oppressed, and caring for those in need. Let us be like King David, who not only danced before the Lord but also fed the hungry and sacrificed for the people. Let us remember that our worship should lead us to action, to making a difference in the world. And when we do this, when we truly touch the oppressed and marginalized, then we can truly enter into the presence of God and have something to dance about.



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