

Let Us Dance

Pastor Brett Jenkins, STS
Wednesday Vespers, October 20, 2010
Week of 21st Sunday after Pentecost

Please note: The following sermon is provided as a resource for the thought, prayer, and meditation of the members and friends of the Society of the Holy Trinity. It is the residue of a verbal event, and thus it may not be a word for word transcript of the sermon heard at the service listed above nor does it have academic footnotes and other details that would be expected in a written document. The author gladly acknowledges the prior thought and work of many Christians before him.

Luke 7:18-35

The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And when the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?'" In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings' courts. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written,

"Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way before you."

I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." (When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.)

"To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another,

"We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge, and you did not weep."

For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by all her children."

It was a middle school dance. The lights were dim, and the music was loud; loud and droningly repetitive, one song barely distinguishable from another to those uninitiated in the intricacies of preteen marketing. The popular kids had come to demonstrate their popularity and take steps to shore it up future erosion. The druggies had come to sneak out and smoke pot. The jocks had come to flex their muscles, and their sycophants had come to admire them as they did so. The geeks and Goths had come to people-watch and feel superior, commenting knowingly amongst themselves on all they observed. The teachers came to make sure no fights broke out and that as much order as could be reasonably expected from hormonal thirteen and fourteen year olds was preserved, and me, I came to...

Actually, that was a good question. Why was I there? I came because I thought it was the sort of thing you were supposed to do at that age. I came, both hoping someone would notice me, and

desperately afraid that they would, as that typically meant some sort of embarrassment. I came admiring the girls, but taking no steps to be attractive to them, as I felt that would somehow make me a "fake." My hair was clean, but frizzy, out of control, and just plain huge; I wear my hair short today because hard experience in the 1980's taught me that when I grow my hair long, I don't so much end up looking like Ted Nugent as Art Garfunkel on a bad hair day. I came not knowing what I hoped would happen that night. And feeling as awkward, uncommitted, and out of place as I did, you can imagine what I did:

Nothing. I stood. I watched. I talked to a few people, but didn't really feel drawn into the orbit of any of the groups I previously described. The small group of my friends in attendance were sitting around a table discussing Dungeons and Dragons, and I had no interest in that this night. So, I got a drink of soda, which I carefully nursed, looking over the brim of the Styrofoam cup at all the various games going on around the room, the various human dramas and agendas, wondering where I fit into any of them.

Like I said, it was a middle school dance.

Fast forward twenty seven years. I look at my life and marvel at how little has changed—how little I have changed. In my ministry, I am self-consciously orthodox. At first this was because I felt pushed so hard to become heterodox at seminary, and any time I feel like I'm being manipulated, I tend to get my back up and fight. But as I have matured theologically (to the degree I have done so), I have cultivated my orthodoxy as a sign of continuity with the Christians of every age and every locale, figuring that if the faith was delivered once for all to the Church, my similarities to people like Irenaeus, Basil, Augustine, and Luther ought to outweigh my dissimilarities. Yet I find that my orthodoxy is too often (in the words of Professor Kenda Criesy Dean at Princeton) a label and not an identity. It is merely a label because I believe in good stewardship, but make poor choices at the table and in the store. I preach purity, but let my eyes or—God forgive me—sometimes my mind wander. I declare the way of the cross to be the way of life, but cry out "why, O Lord?" when I am expected to carry my own for a while. My faith speaks to me of self-denial, but being a true child of post World War II America, I desire self-fulfillment. I preach discipleship as discipline, but often feel like praying the offices "gets in the way of" me accomplishing what I really need to do each day. I preach Christ's sufficiency, but struggle to be ever more self-sufficient, especially in the eyes of my congregation. I examine my life and discover that a saying I learned from our brethren who struggle with alcohol addiction is especially applicable to me: I have an EGO problem; I am always Easing God Out. Does this poem from the wall of Lübeck Cathedral sound like you?

Ye call Me Master, and obey Me not;
Ye call Me light, and see Me not;
Ye call Me way, and walk Me not;
Ye call Me Life, and desire Me not;
Ye call Me Wise, and follow Me not;
Ye call Me Fair, and love Me not;
Ye call Me Rich, and ask Me not;
Ye call Me Eternal, and seek Me not;
Ye call Me Gracious, and trust Me not;
Ye call Me Noble, and serve Me not;
Ye call Me Mighty, and honor Me not;
Ye call Me Just, and fear Me not.

Too often, it describes me. I look closely at my life and discover that I am like the Pharisees and lawyers in today's reading, defending my religious orthodoxy, busy trying to convince with my heterodox and yes, sometimes even heretical colleagues of the tune God is piping, but all the time failing to dance to that tune myself.

No, not much has changed. In many ways I am still like that kid I was so many years ago; I have come to the dance and discover that I am not dancing. But you know what happened at that dance twenty seven years ago? A friend of mine, who had been a playmate when we were quite young was there. Our ways had diverged over the years, and whereas I came to the dance awkward and uncertain of my place, she came as a head of the cheerleading squad, one of the beautiful people whose place that night was assured. She could have ignored me, and indeed I expected her to do as much. Our friendship was a thing of the past, the fruit of our parents' relationship and not a thing of our own ordaining on the adolescent "mean streets" of the hallways of pubescent middle school life.

Indeed, she did ignore me for most of the night, though now I suspect it was out of hope that I would pull myself together and engage the social circumstances. Finally, when the evening was half gone and I was on my third Dr. Pepper, she came over to me at the table where I sat against the wall, still debating in my mind what activity would garner me the most fun while incurring the least chance of embarrassment. She didn't sit down, but leaned in and over me so I could hear her clearly over the trance-inducing thump of the speakers.

"Brett, you look like an *idiot* sitting here." It would have been enough to simply be noticed by so high-ranking a person in the adolescent pecking order in what I perceived to be so unfriendly a context, to have acknowledged our old friendship and my standing in her eyes, but Kira did more than that. She reached down, grabbed my hand firmly, and with a gesture that brooked no objections, dragged me out onto the dance floor, into the midst of all the other cheerleaders.

I'll never forget the feel of her taking my hand, not because it gave a thrill to my hormone-wracked young self, but because it was simply a real human touch, unexpected, and so unexpectedly tangible and inescapable. I'll never forget that her hand was sweaty and to my surprise, despite her dance floor exertions, cold. Either the room was colder than I remember or I discovered something unexpected about my old friend—that she had cold hands. In any event, that cool, moist touch was an unexpected moment of grace, an initiation into the reality that was all around me, but from which I had withheld myself for a whole host of reasons.

And as she dragged me to the dance floor, though I stumbled and fell and undoubtedly looked as awkward as I felt, lo, I found to my great surprise that I was dancing. Moreover, I discovered to my even greater surprise what you think would be obvious, but somehow wasn't to me at that moment; that the purpose and the real joy of a dance is the dancing.

Return to the present, and I come here, to worship, and I recollect myself from the scatteredness of this life; I recall who I am in Christ. When I do, I discover to my chagrin and my shame that once again I have been at a dance, and absenting myself the dancing. As we learn from the Revelation of St. John, I come here to liturgy and recall that the heavenly dance is already in progress, and another hand reaches out to touch me. As surely as if I had encountered Him on a hill, in a bar, or in somebody's dining room in Palestine two thousand years ago, Jesus touches me through His Word and Sacrament. He speaks to me a word of Law; "Brett, you not only look like an idiot, you are an

idiot to live as though you do not know me, to sin so that my grace may abound." But then, when I have been properly and appropriately chastised, He speaks also to me a word of Gospel, a word of grace. He takes my hand firmly and irresistibly in His own nail-pierced one and says, "Look; The dance is still going on. The music of the spheres is still playing. The saints are still dancing... and singing, singing not their own virtues, but my praises. Lo, my grace is sufficient for you; I have given you feet. I have given you a voice. Dance! Sing! Sing, and as you sing, like John's disciples, tell what you have seen: Declare Me just. Declare my Person just by clinging to me alone. Declare my teaching just by seeking to be conformed to it. Declare my ways just by submitting to my discipline. Declare my wisdom just by living as one of my children in the cycle of grace, sin, repentance, forgiveness, grace, sin, repentance, forgiveness, and grace that I have ordained as the true path of righteousness. Dance, sing, and declare Me just."

Brothers and sisters, the tune, the dance, the dance floor, and even our partners are perhaps not of our choosing. They are the choice of Him whose justice we declare, whose wisdom we justify, and to whose purposes we submit ourselves, knowing that "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." We may have feet of clay, but they are feet nonetheless, and our Lord calls us to dance. Let us praise Him for the opportunity to be so conformed to the image of His Son, and let us dance!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

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Posted — 6 January 2011

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