

DANCE WITH THE SPIRIT

Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-18

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I am not a dancer. Unlike George Gershwin, “I ain’t got rhythm.” My date at the high school prom tried to teach me to polka, but once around the floor and a few smashed toes persuaded her to find a different polka partner for the evening.

On another night at a different party, this same young woman told me the secret to dancing to the popular music of the day. She said, “You’ve just got to strut your stuff.” Stuff, I gathered, was something on the inside that told your arms and legs... and hips, mostly hips, how to move. When I realized that “my stuff” didn’t include hips, I managed to hold my own on the dance floor, but then this free form sort of dancing does allow you to steer well clear of other’s feet. In fact, you really didn’t even need a partner to “strut your stuff.”

As I said, I’m not a dancer, but I can tell the difference between people who dance for their own pleasure and people whose pleasure comes in the interchange with their partner. It’s easy to see this in a foxtrot or a polka, but you find it also in a jitterbug and even the free form stuff. You see couples for whom dancing is one more way of communicating, of being with each other. They know their own stuff and they know the stuff of their partner.

I love watching this kind of dance, this level of dancing. I’ve seldom experienced it on the dance floor, but I have on the basketball court. I understand and feel the rhythm of a game. I know about dribbling, passing, rebounding, and shooting. I used to be able to execute some of the important techniques to playing the game well. And I almost never step on any toes. I haven’t played in a while, but I always took the most pleasure when I finally understood that even the opponents were actually partners in the game.

The dance where you understand the other’s stuff and the other understands your stuff is critical to the peace and the health of the world. This dance helps you to love your neighbor. It creates and supports healthy marriages. It begins the healing process in broken relationships.

The disciples are in Jerusalem after Jesus ascends. They are waiting for a dance partner. Jesus has promised them a companion who knows their stuff and will bring her own stuff.

First she brings the wind, not a gentle breeze, but a gust of wind that makes you sit up and take notice, a wind that remind you that the Spirit is wild. As John’s gospel tells us, she blows where she wills and we don’t know where she came from or where she’s going. We know when she’s here and we know that she is going to be leading this dance.

The first thing the Spirit does is to mark you with a tongue of fire. She does this because you aren't ready to dance. Something is holding you back. The disciples had guilt perhaps for abandoning and denying Jesus, or maybe they lacked confidence or didn't feel worthy or didn't feel like they had the necessary skills or knowledge.

Set all that aside because the Spirit brings a fire that cleanses. You come to the dance as a forgiven person, a person made worthy, and a person loved by God. You are marked, as we say in baptism, as God's own. You are certified as ready to dance.

Wind and fire, but now comes the dance itself... the Pentecost dance... a dance conducted between strangers who couldn't even speak the same language before. What you lacked the Spirit made up. You are given the capacity to understand someone else's "stuff."

Would that this came as easily as on the day of Pentecost? All these Jews are gathered in Jerusalem, but they come from different parts of the Empire and they speak different languages. Please notice that the solution that the Spirit offers is not to bring a common language.

There are some common misunderstandings in the story about the tower of Babel. Many believe that God confused their languages because they sought to build a tower into the heavens, but it's not the tower that's the problem. God is concerned that they will all settle into the city and thus fail to fill the earth. The variety of languages is not a punishment for human arrogance, but an aid, a blessing if you will, that helps humanity fulfill its purpose.

Paul says a similar thing when he affirms the different gifts in the church as working for the common good. In the dance, we need to understand each other's stuff. Unfortunately, we're not all interested in this. For a long time the church preferred to tell women what they could and couldn't do rather than seeking to understand the gifts and the experience that women bring to the community of faith. I heard a lot of great sermons at the Festival of Homiletics in Texas, but the most inspiring came from African American women. The best summary I've ever heard of what it was like to live under Roman oppression came from a woman. Though we don't relegate women to the nursery or the kitchen anymore, sexism continues to thrive. Too many people would rather step on toes than understand the "stuff" that women have to contribute to the dance.

Racism presents a similar challenge to the church. Some people think they aren't racist because they practice a "color blind" philosophy. To fail to notice the color of one's skin is to fail to recognize the experiences that have arisen in that person's life. Black people have different experiences of law enforcement, of school, of economic opportunity and of God than do white people. The dance of the spirit calls us not to wash over the differences but to enter into the experience of the other, so that we might learn to love each other in a deeper, more intimate level.

Jesus does not call us to judge others for the color of their skin, for the gender of the person they choose to love, or for the music that inspires them. The Spirit invites us into a dance that honors the other, that rejoices in the persons they are, that acknowledges the varied experiences they have had. Neither our intellect nor our moral purity make us children of God. Neither our social standing nor economic circumstances win us any points with God. The dance of the Spirit is a dance of love that makes connections not divisions, that honors diversity not uniformity. God's children are many and various. The dance awaits. Amen.