

A Sermon by N. Sellers, preached at First Congregational Church, Branford on 1-29-17

"Learning to Dance"

Matthew 11:16-19

If you keep your eyes open as you travel about, I'm sure you've noticed this... It has to do with those small, inspirational or humorous sayings that you find written on signs or magnets or T-shirts or bumper stickers or well, you name it, you can find them almost anywhere! Used to be you'd find simple sayings in cross stitch on samplers, framed on people's walls, or featured on pillow covers... Things like "Lord, bless this home and all who enter here." Or "Give us Lord our daily bread," or "Love makes a house a home." The variety and attitude out there now is simply amazing, you know, "Baby on board" on a t-shirt and an arrow pointing directly to a pregnant woman's mid-section, or "Real men love cats" or "I've had my coffee. You may speak now!" I've been noticing that more and more of these phrases are showing up in all kinds of places too: in craft stores, on people's walls or their coffee cups, out in the garden on little signs, or on banners or carved into a stone. Many of these sayings have a way of drawing me in, or giving me pause. There's one I saw on a bumper sticker which really got me thinking... It goes like this: "What if the hokey pokey really is 'all that it's about?'" You know the song and the dance, especially if you've got children or grandchildren around (*DEMO this*): "You put your left foot in, you put your left foot out, you put your left foot in and you shake it all about. You do the hokey pokey and you turn yourself around; that's what it's all about!"

As a parent I've developed a growing appreciation for dancing, and this has to do with noticing our daughter's delight. As a little child, it soon became apparent that like many children, she loved to dance. As soon as music started, any music, she started to sway and move, and soon the hands got going and then there's stomping and skipping and hopping, and yes, the smiles and giggles were fantastic too! In the supermarket or the car; when one of her toys played a tune or sang a song; when the radio played out something fun and upbeat; when her daycare person would crank the music up in the play room; even in the back of the church as I would be helping to lead worship in music, she just couldn't help it – it was her natural reaction to get things moving to the beat.

Unfortunately, dancing is not something that was allowed to develop as part of my personal vocabulary, although I enjoy trying. Do we have any dancers in the house? My background in the Mennonite and Church of the Brethren Christian traditions meant that my parents weren't keen on dancing for "religious reasons." Seems that their conservative ministers, as they were growing up, taught them that moving your body about to any sort of music was a much too worldly pursuit – and for some of the types of dancing that goes on, maybe they had a point! But it deprived me of going to dance lessons with my classmates in seventh and eighth, and put me into the role of "wallflower" at all the class dances I had to suffer through during high school. Does anybody else remember those? Oh the anxiety! I can still recall my first 7th grade dance at Michael's house!?

In our text for the morning, is a parable about children and the games they play, and in particular about dancing and singing. Here is one of those rather pithy parables of Jesus, in which the common games of children, played in the marketplace, are being used metaphorically, to talk about issues of faith and belief. Speaking to the "current generation" or "all you people listening out there," Jesus makes the point that his Jewish peers are dealing with faith just like children do, playing games in the marketplace. The first game offered is a wedding game, with dance music offered on the flute, so that everybody can join in the dancing like they always do at weddings. But this doesn't agree with some of the potential little playmates, and so the switch is made to a funeral game, where the adult activity of grieving and burying the dead is to be reenacted, and suitably mournful singing supplied. Once again, the game is rejected '...you did not mourn!' "Hey, you're not playing by the rules! You're supposed to be sad!" The complaining goes on and without agreement on what game to play, there's complaining instead of dancing and singing. "We don't want to play *that!*" (R. Gardner in BCBC [Matt 188](#))

It's in verses 18 & 19 that we're given the explanation for this parable: John the Baptizer, arrives on the scene without celebration or fanfare, dressed strangely, living out in the desert and sharing a very sobering message of judgment and doom. He is promptly condemned as demonic, a fanatic possessed by a demon. The parable represents John with a funeral and the singing of a funeral dirge. Jesus approaches the things of faith and belief from the very different direction by eating and drinking and hanging out with all sorts of people, without regard for class or gender or background or station in life. Our parable makes reference to this Jesus way with wedding dance music, played on a flute. And again, rejection is swift: This seems to be a real problem to the religious crowd and so, Jesus is accused of being too cozy with folks, too ready to overindulge -- why, he's a party animal and a drunken over-eater, always going to banquets and such! Way too interested in enjoying himself and others to be somebody we should care about listening to, right? Jesus is saying to "you folks, you unreceptive and unbelieving people," that obviously "John is too holy and I'm not holy enough." (D. Hagner in WBC [Matt 1-13](#) 310-11) Each is rejected by a generation that is awaiting God's long-promised intervention into their world. Neither of them meets the right criteria.

Here for the first time in Matthew, we get some indication about the parallels between John and Jesus. Both arrived on the scene, ushering in the arrival of the kingdom of God: John, preparing the way for the One to come, by calling people to repent and prepare; and Jesus, the Son of Man, who is Wisdom personified, preaching the way of the kingdom in all that he said and did. Both are central figures in the unfolding of this new chapter in salvation history, both run into rejection and unbelief amongst their peers, their Jewish listeners. You may recall that earlier in this same chapter of our gospel, John arranges to have some of his disciples make a visit to Jesus, asking if he is "the one to come," or should they keep waiting for another? (11:2-3) Jesus' response is unequivocal without being a simple 'yes:' 'You need to go tell John what you're seeing and hearing; "the blind are receiving sight, the lame walk, the lepers are healed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are receiving the good news."' (11:4-3) Using the language of the prophet, Jesus makes it plain that the deeds of righteousness, long ago identified and the ones ushered in by the Messiah, are now taking place and he is the reason. (Gardner, 189)

You might also be realizing by now, as Matthew's first readers surely did, that as the mystery of the kin-dom unfolds in the gospel story, both John and Jesus are killed. In the ultimate rejection, each perishes, running into the unbelief of their generation. (Hagner, 311) Jesus says some strong things about John just before our parable, describing him as greater than any other human being born in that time, the Elijah whom everyone has been waiting for as a sign that the Messiah is about to appear. (11-14). Where John is one side of the coin, in the ways of the kin-dom, Jesus is the other. Where John prepares the soil, Jesus comes planting and nurturing and harvesting. Where John is crying out "You brood of vipers...Bear fruit worthy of repentance," Jesus comes teaching and sharing the good news of the kin-dom, healing and touching and curing and casting out demons. He also goes to a lot of banquets; dining and drinking, going to weddings and dancing!

Somehow, when it comes to belief, we seem to be more open to being shaped by the asceticism and sober words of judgment that come from a figure like John, don't we? He sounds like a righteous and holy person – he kinda' looks the part of a devout, and pious religious leader, who denies himself the pleasures of life to share the sobering news of change and transformation to come. This is what we expect in a holy man, right? We need to mourn and to wail a bit; faith is built with good doses of sack cloth and ashes.

When it comes to the things of Jesus, however, there are some things about his manner and his teaching that just seem too outrageous for many: he's into celebrating people and meeting their needs – he goes about touching those considered unclean and eating and drinking with all the impure types: lepers and tax collectors, women and minority races. He's more about new ways and fresh visions of being righteous and this new kin-dom he continued to talk about turned lots of things upside-down!

In our day and age, perhaps more so than in the time when Matthew was first read, we've become convinced that Jesus is the Way, truth and life, that the good news about the Kin-dom is the way of righteousness and joy. We've become Christians, followers of Jesus, not followers of John; we don't need to ask if we should be waiting for someone else or if Jesus is the One. The ways of Jesus have been vindicated, just as Jesus promises in the final verse of our parable: as Wisdom personified, the deeds of Jesus give glory to God. They have born the fruit of open eyes, listening ears, healing shared, justice made real and vision restored. The empty tomb of Easter bespeaks the power of salvation for all eternity, but is there something more here?

I'm wondering if we've missed the part about the celebration and the dancing. What if faith is more about learning to dance than following the rules or getting it absolutely right all the time? What if we need to learn more about dancing than about judgment and formality? John's brand of holiness can be very appealing for its black and white flavor, but where are the love and the joy? Oh I know what people will say: This Jesus stuff doesn't seem quite right – it's not "on message" with what we find elsewhere in the Bible, it changes the rules! Where's the humility, the guilt? Exactly!

This parable makes a strong push for a faith that's about learning to dance and sing like they do at weddings, instead of a faith that rests of the funeral songs and mourning and sorrow. If John represents the Law and the age that was from the time of the prophets until he arrived on the scene, Jesus bears the good news of forgiveness

and renewal in the new age of his appearing right down to our present time and into the future. Maybe it's John and Jesus who are sitting on the curb in the marketplace, urging people to find agreement and play together. (D. Bruner The Christbook 422) Just like in the days of Jesus, neither the inviting, happy wedding music of Jesus, nor the solemn, serious music of John really appeal much to folks today; mostly, there's outright rejection, and nobody wants to play.

But if being a disciple of Jesus is more about a dance than a dirge, maybe there are some things we can do about becoming better dancers: Maybe deepening faith and righteousness involve learning to move and sway in time with the music of the Spirit rather than to the rhythms of the spirits of that whirl around us. And I'm imagining that just as with the first dance at a wedding, in times when someone's in the lead and another follows, our lives of faith depend on trusting that even though we may not always know the next move, the Lord of the Dance is there, able to carry us along. As we spin and weave, maybe we're also sharing in a sort of "line dance" where everybody's welcome to get up off their seats and join the group, picking up the motions and the steps as they go – no two dancers are alike, but they're still making similar moves.

I have a colleague in ministry who is a competitive ballroom dancer. When I asked her what dancing means to her, here's what she said: "To me, dancing is a form of joy and freedom. Moving to the music is something that makes my soul sing...Dancing is about letting go and letting the music take over..."

As we dance forward into our Annual Meeting and into this 373rd year of congregational life, we have opportunities to welcome new dancers and learn new dance steps. There's new music and new rhythms that come with a commitment to welcoming new dancers to enter the Dance called spiritual community: In worship, in refugee welcome activities, in the Community Dining room meal, at God Squad and summer day camps; in next Wednesday night's gathering to be led by Susan Murtha and in our upcoming series to be offered on the 5 Wednesday evenings during Lent... See, in all these ways and others, we have the choice to follow the footsteps of an Instructor who celebrates each and every dancer!

I'm actually beginning to think that there's a lot more about the "hokey pokey" than most people realize, and that becoming more of a dancer is really what it's all about: (*DO DANCE here & invite others*) "You put your right hand in, you put your right hand out, you put right hand in and you shake it all about, you do the 'hokey pokey' and you turn yourself around – that's what it's all about." Amen.

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