

Second-Line of Grace: *Matthew 11:16-19; 28-30*

Norwalk Christian Church, July 6, 2014, Year A, Proper 9

I do not dance. I will not dance. I don't want to learn. I don't want to practice. You're welcome to dance all you want. Dance, dance, dance the night away. Shake your groove thing, shake your groove thing, yeah, yeah. Show 'em how you do it now.

Zoom-a-zoom-zoom-zoom and a poom-poom...you can shake it. But keep me out of it.

I have "danced" before, and notice the quotation marks. Usually at weddings, if I have to, I'll do a little middle-school sway with Marti. At Nick and Liz Wood's wedding reception the other night, we left right before the dancing begun. We said it was because it was getting late, and we needed to go home and check on the kids...but really, I don't dance.

Maybe had circumstances of upbringing been different, I'd be a great dancer like Rihanna or those contestants on Dancing with the Stars. But we Stanley's don't dance. Marti, maybe, but she's a transplant into the family. Growing up in Niceville, Florida, we were taught that nice boys and nice girls did not dance. Perhaps dancing wasn't fully in the sin-category, but it was close, too close for comfort, and so we best stay away from the sway.

I remember in middle school when my youth minister taught us a fancy word for "dancing". He said the word was scriptural. *Lasciviousness*. It sounds sinful. And, if I'm not mistaken, the word's made it to at least one of those infamous sin-lists in scripture, but only in the King James Version. You may think it was harmful dancing, just innocent fun, but really, it was LASCIVISOUSNESS, and you know a word like that can never be good.

Now, don't hear me wrong, this morning. I'm not saying that you cannot dance. By all means, do a little dance with K.C. and the Sunshine Band if you must. I won't judge you. But I won't be joining you.

While I no longer believe that dancing resides somewhere near sin-territory, this does not mean that I've been miraculously imparted with a spirit-outpouring of rhythmic grace. I couldn't dance if I wanted to.

So, when I read our text this morning, I'm tempted to join the folks Jesus speaks about, who hear the flute being played, but who do not get up and dance. Just let me sit in my seat, soaking in the beautiful music, while I tap my foot and watch you dance the night away.

Maybe I would have been a better disciple of John the Baptist than of Christ. Now, Jesus and John were forever linked, cousins. John was said to be the forerunner of Jesus, preparing the way, making the paths straight. And he was the real deal. A tough, straight-laced guy. A serious man. He's what we call in the South, a "hell-fire and brimstone preacher."

He lived in the wild, the original environmentalist, living off the land with a zero-carbon-footprint. He ate bugs and drunk from trees and made his clothes from the organic fibers of wild beasts. And he was seriously off his rocker. This guy would stand in the desert, and yell at all the sins of the world, and he wasn't afraid to name names. And you better believe, John did not dance. How could he, what with all the injustice and evil in the world! This is not a time for partying; it's a time for repenting!!

It's no wonder that when people saw John they said, "He has a demon!" This guy was nuts!

But Jesus, oh Jesus. He may be the cousin of John the Baptist, but he was nothing like his cousin. They kind of looked a-like, I imagine. But you couldn't tell, with John's wild-hair, never-cut beard and rarely-washed face. They were both men of conviction, and yet they couldn't be anymore different.

I'm not saying John is a bad guy. He is a righteous man and this world needs "Johns" to speak truth to power. As Jesus says of John, "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist." But if you expected the Messiah to look anything like John, the one who prepared the way...think again, John believed what we were taught as kids, that bad company corrupts good morals.

Even though John may not indulge, to even *BE* in the presence of such immorality could corrupt his soul. So John would keep his distance from the revelry, standing outside on the sidewalk, yelling into a megaphone the sins of everyone at party. And where was Jesus? Well, Jesus was inside, partying. Compared to John, Jesus does seem like "a glutton and a drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"

The name "Tax collector" may not cause you the same revulsion that it did for people in Jesus' day, or at least not for the same reasons, but feel free to substitute the outcast and ne'er-do-well of your choice.

Jesus, friend of prostitutes. Friend of partiers. Friend of politicians. Friend of alcoholics. Friend of the poor. Friend of the rich. Friend of the immigrant. Friend of the straight. Friend of the gay. This is Jesus. And these are his friends. With friends like these, it's not hard to see why he was accused of being a "glutton" and a "drunk".

Let's face it. This is not what we expect from the one who claims to be the one who can reveal to us God. This conduct is not very becoming for a Messiah. If you're not a little confused at Jesus' behavior in the Gospels, then you're not paying attention. Because, let's be honest. The last person we expected to see at that party was Jesus.

What do you have to say in your defense, Jesus?

Are you a drunk?! Are you a glutton?! Is it really true that you eat, drink, and dance with sinners and tax collectors?!

But Jesus gives no defense. He barely even acknowledges the accusations. All he gives us is one short proverb: *Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.*

Now what does that mean? Because I always thought that wisdom was vindicated by getting it right. That if you were truly wise, you'd have all the right answers and believe all the right things. The folks accusing Jesus, they're the wise ones, because they know the way it's supposed to be, how Jesus and the other righteous are supposed to act, and with whom they're supposed to hang out.

But no, Jesus says. Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.

Perhaps this is why we miss Jesus. Because some of us show up looking for all the right answers, right doctrines, and right beliefs, and it never occurs to us that Jesus is not found in any of those things. Some of us gave up long ago on finding the right answers, and we're not sure there's any answers at all. If there's room for doubt, then there's no room for belief, we say. So there is no Jesus.

And we miss it. We miss Jesus, because we're looking for the wrong thing. We're looking for doctrine, and truth, and answers, and sufficient explanations. We're looking for a Jesus who fits into a box. Who plays by our rules and dances to our tune. A Jesus who believes everything we believe, who likes the folks we like, and hates the ones we don't.

We show up to church, expecting to meet a Jesus who looks at us the same way we look at ourselves. Who is just as disappointed with what we've made of our lives as we are. Who believes right along with us, that we are not good enough, and there is nothing—*nothing*—that we can ever do to change that.

And the flutes are playing, but we don't dance, because why would we? What is there to dance about?

While we sit with our arms crossed, certain we have Jesus all figured out, there he is, dining with gluttons and drunkard, hugging lepers, partying with tax collectors and prostitutes, and dancing with sinners.

Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.

And these are the deeds of Jesus. He doesn't play by our rules. Jesus doesn't meet our expectations. Jesus doesn't dance to our tune. Jesus came, not to authenticate what we already believed to be true, or even to argue us into unquestionable belief; Jesus came to explode all our expectations, about God, about this world, about ourselves. Jesus came to completely redefine everything, to teach us a new song, and to show folks like me, with two

left feet, how to dance to that gracious song.

We spent 2 years living in the beautiful, tragic city of New Orleans. Finn was born there, and we learned quickly about the local tradition of Second-Lining. If you don't know what second-lining is, it's like a parade, but not like the one we had Friday. This parade is spontaneous, and no spectators are allowed.

It starts with a brass band that walks down the street, playing a song. And it starts off slow, and builds as they go. The band is called the first line. They're the music. They set the rhythm. They throw the party.

As they march and play, people from all over, from houses and from businesses, in suits and in shorts, tourists and locals, they all pour out into the streets to form the second line behind the first line. Before long, everyone is on the street, dancing to the band's tune, forgetting their cares and worries, as they join in the party. Even for someone like me, who does not dance...it's hard to resist.

And I got to thinking...what better metaphor for the ministry of Jesus, than a Second-Line? Jesus is the main line, playing his flutes, dancing with the children through the streets, the market, right through the walls that divide us, right through our prejudices and fears, playing the tune of his welcoming grace.

Can you hear his song? He's not singing about doctrine. He's not singing about perfection. He's singing about grace. He's singing about rest. He sings: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

How many of us need rest? How many of us need to just lay our burdens down, and just let go and dance? He's singing to you and to me and to everyone who has ever found themselves weighed down with the heavy burdens: burdens heaped on our shoulders by our church, by our families, by the unrealistic expectations we place on our own shoulders. To you, to us all, he sings, Come...Come and I will give you rest.

And everywhere people are falling in line, from high-rises and from houses, in the city, in the suburbs, and from the farm, young and old, rich and poor, the righteous and the sinners, people of all colors, people of all beliefs, people from all over the world, our entire Generation joining in the second-line of God's grace.

It doesn't matter who you are. He's singing to you. Come to me, all you who are weary and weighed down with heavy burdens. Come. Come. And you will find rest for your souls.

This is our song. This is our dance. May we keep on dancing, until the whole world joins with us in God's second-line of grace. Amen.