

Dancing in the Aisles

2 Samuel 6:1-5

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL

Matt Matthews

July 25, 2021

2 Samuel 6:1-5 ¹David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. ²David and all the people with him set out and went from Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the LORD of hosts who is enthroned on the cherubim. ³They carried the ark of God on a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart ⁴with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark. ⁵David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the LORD with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.

Dance is a great metaphor for faith. To dance is to say something with your body and soul that cannot be expressed merely with words. Faith is often like that. We talk about our faith, of course, but there are aspects of our faith that can't be summarized in words.

Faith is like a dance. We grow in the faith, we learn, we explore. We are pilgrims on a journey. We worship. We serve. It is like a dance. Faith is like a dance.

I am not able to dance well. I'm embarrassed to actually dance. I have rhythm, but my rhythm doesn't match the music. And poor Rachel has to wear steel-toed shoes when she dances with me.

But faith can be likened to a dance. We move in and out of relationships. We experience ups and downs. We reach out and we are reached for. Like in a dance. God is our partner. We are each other's partners. We reach out to include strangers. And unlike a real dance where wall flowers go unpicked and shy dancers like me avoid joining in, in the dance that is our faith, we all find our way onto the floor, we all belong, and we all move in the grace of God.¹

The topic of dance could devolve into a hundred references to Bad Country Songs. This one, by LeAnne Womack, is one of the good ones (written by Mark Sanders and Tia Sillers):

I hope you still feel small when you stand beside the ocean
Whenever one door closes, I hope one more opens
Promise me that you'll give faith a fighting chance
And when you get the choice to sit it out or dance

I hope you dance
I hope you dance

¹ One of my childhood friends—Dan Maher—became a priest. For some years Dan served on the staff of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington D.C. Every Christmas Eve, a rerun of the Mass recorded there that night would appear on our TV channel. After the Mass from Rome, Rachel and I would watch Dan's Mass from Washington. We were exhausted from our own Christmas Eve services in our own protestant churches. Our children were finally tucked into bed. Dan was never the preacher at those services; some bishop from somewhere was. But Dan's job was making sure the service went smoothly. And at the high altar, Dan's hands would dance. He turned pages or held chalices. We loved to watch Dan's hands move around that table. It was a holy dance.

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Dervishes are a Sufi religious order of the Muslim tradition. They dance—hence the term “whirling dervish”—as part of a ceremony called “Sama,” which is meant to lead them to a state of religious ecstasy and is performed as a “remembrance of God.” UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, has named the whirling dance a “masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of Western Humanity.”

Faith is like a dance for Muslims, for Christians, for Jews—for all of us.

In the New Testament, when the Prodigal comes home, the father throws a party—a party where, we presume, there was music and dancing.

Jesus’s first miracle took place at a wedding in Cana. There were people there. There was wine. It was a celebration. Do you think for one second there was no dancing?

In the Old Testament, Miriam and all the women sing and dance when the Egyptian army chasing them is drowned (Ex 15:20).

Women dance at the religious festival of Shiloh in the “dancing meadow” (Judg 21:21). Jephthah’s daughter meets her dad with dancing when he returns from war against the Ammonites. Jeremiah promises that Israel will dance the dance of merry-makers one day (Jer31:4).²

And there is David . . . He and 30,000 men went up to bring the Ark of God into Jerusalem. The Ark was said to carry the Ten Commandments. Some traditions said it carried manna, Moses’ Torah, and Aaron’s rod. To the ancient Israelites, the Ark reminded them that God was with them as protector and as guide. The Ark reminded them of God’s presence, God’s sheer holiness, God’s power, God’s provision.

When David led the procession, he danced. He danced with all his might.

God’s good news is so good, sometimes words fail us. Sometimes, only dance will do.

“Dance, then, wherever you may be/
I am the LORD of the dance, said he/
and I’ll lead you all, wherever you may be/
and I’ll lead you all in the dance, said he.”

* * *

Summer makes me always think of Montreat. As you know, our eldest son is the creative services manager at Montreat Conference Center in Montreat NC. Our boys grew up going there when Rachel and I attended or led conferences. Rachel went to the youth conferences there when she was in high school. When our boys were in high school, they went to these conferences also. In my young adulthood, I co-directed one of these amazing conferences.

² (See “Dancing” pp12-13, *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol 2).

I'd like to try to paint a picture for you. I'd like to invite you into a story.

At the end of each week of the conference, a thousand young people strong and their leaders shuffle forward for communion in Anderson Auditorium during the evening worship service. The preaching and prayers are over. Twilight is giving way to dark. The cool of night is beginning to rise. Often, as they make their way forward, they sing a familiar song that had been introduced earlier in the week, a song they now know by heart. They sing as they come forward, music swelling, voices rising.

Verse: As I went down in the river to pray
Studying about that good ol' way
And who shall wear the starry crown?
Good Lord show me the way!

Chorus: O sisters let's go down
Let's go down, come on down
O sisters let's go down
Down in the river to pray

Bread and juice await them. A Holy Communion. Communion with each other. Communion with God. A thin, thin place. Generations ago, a healing-body had been broken and redeeming-blood had been shed. And now, the room is awash in remembering, thanking, praying. Faith is like a song. And living the faith is sometimes like a dance.

Chorus: O brothers let's go down
Let's go down, come on down
O sisters let's go down
Down in the river to pray

Every year this scene is similarly played out. Disciples—young and old—walk forward through an evening service of worship. Some quietly weep, faces glowing. Whole youth groups from across the country hold hands in a long, a long line of bare, braced arms and tanned legs—brown people, white people, brown-white-freckled-bearded-smooth-people, young men and women, some grey-headed ones (young in Spirit), some in wheelchairs, some hobbling on walkers, some veritably floating above the stone aisles, some silent, but most singing:

Chorus: O children let's go down
Let's go down, come on down
O children let's go down
Down in the river to pray

It is like a river. Every year, it is like a holy rising of humanity, of prayer-song. It is like an offering. It is indescribable. It is like a dance lifted by the song of our beating, beating hearts.

Chorus: O people let's go down
Let's go down, come on down
O people let's go down
Down in the river to pray

Worshippers make their way forward to the table. That massive communion table up front sits like a great Ark of the Covenant, a symbol of God's power, God's presence, God's grace. Every person comes. Every

pew empties. These children of God—*like us*—have been invited to join the dance. And, like David, *they dance with all their might*.

Chorus: O children let's go down
Let's go down, come on down
O children let's go down
Down in the river to pray

(Congregation and Choir joining in:)

**Chorus: O children let's go down
Let's go down, come on down
O children let's go down
Down in the river to pray**

**Chorus: O children let's go down
Let's go down, come on down
O children let's go down
Down in the river to pray**

AMEN.