

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19, Psalm 24, Mark 6:14-29
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How unusual for two of our lessons this morning to feature dancing, which is mentioned rarely in the Bible. While I don't watch it, I'm told that "Dancing with the Stars" is wildly popular. I have seen portions of "So You Think You Can Dance" a few times.

Herodias' daughter, sometimes identified as Salome, does what most scholars think was a very sensuous dance, perhaps like a solo tango. Herod had a reputation for debauchery, with gluttonous eating and heavy drinking. On this occasion, Salome was dancing to entertain the powerful friends of her stepfather, Herod Antipas. She obviously sent Herod into such an altered state that he promised to give her nearly anything she wanted up to half of his kingdom.

King David, on the other hand, is dancing with all the house of Israel "before the Lord with all their might...." The occasion is the moving of the ark of God, the ornate box which held the tablets containing the Ten Commandments, to David's city, Jerusalem. Here, David would establish his capital. The ark was thought to be the very throne of Israel's God. Under David's son, Solomon, the ark would be placed in that sacred portion of the Temple called the Holy of Holies.

This joyful procession is celebrating the establishment of Israel as a nation among nations for the first time ever. The Lord is on the throne and David, his servant, is king.

Unlike Salome's more choreographed, voluptuous dance, we can imagine David being completely erratic and wild in his movements. His is the ecstatic leaping and jumping for joy. If he started fully clothed, in his merriment he has thrown off all but the essentials to protect his modesty.

Whereas Herod was more than bedazzled by Salome's seductiveness, Michal, David's wife, despises seeing her royal husband barely clad and acting with such spontaneous abandon. Neither response is commendable.

From the passage in Mark's gospel, we can understand why dancing was frowned upon by many Christian denominations, but David is expressing thanksgiving to his God. His is yet another means of celebrating the wonderful things that our God has done for us just as singing is a joyful response.

Angela Barksdale, who was a parishioner here before she moved to Richmond, threatened to one day dance or skip down the aisle on her way to or from the altar. I encouraged her to do it

to show her gladness for being God's daughter and Jesus' sister. We know that more than ever when we come to receive the sacrament of bread and wine.

The letter to the Ephesians begins this morning with these words, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places...." Even if we don't do a little jig or soft shoe on our way to and from the altar, at least we can be light of heart and step as we prepare to receive Christ and return knowing Jesus has called us "friends."

Incidentally, last Sunday we went to a lovely modern Episcopal church in Boothbay Harbor, Maine, with a friend who grew up here. St. Columba's doesn't have a parish hall so the nave serves as a multi-purpose room. On Wednesdays, we were told, the chairs are moved aside for the dance and exercise class – right in front of the altar!

Whereas both lessons this morning feature dancing, Mark's gospel is more about the circumstances which resulted in the death of John the Baptist. Most noted for baptizing Jesus and proclaiming his arrival, John carried on a courageous prophetic ministry throughout his life.

Prophets in Israel weren't fortune tellers or crystal ball gazers able to accurately foretell distant future events. The word prophet in Hebrew meant 'fruit of the lips.' They were truth tellers. Israel's major and minor prophets told truths the people didn't want to hear. They were unwelcome voices much as truth tellers are today. Some today are called whistleblowers.

John had criticized Herod publically for marrying his brother's wife. This would have been fine according to Jewish law if Herod's brother had died, but he was very much alive. Herodias especially didn't like the negative attention John brought upon the royal couple and wanted him silenced one way or another.

What is most interesting to me is the relationship between John and Herod as described in Mark. We're told Herod feared John because he knew he was a righteous and holy man. Arresting him may have been an act of protecting him from Herodias. Herod was perplexed by what John said, and yet he liked listening to him.

Perhaps like me you read books by spiritually mature men or women that sometimes leave you shaking your head. You don't fully comprehend, but you know they are revealing a higher truth. For me, Anthony De Mello and now Richard Rohr challenge me in that way. At some level, Herod knew John was right, but he couldn't put it into practice. In the end, his true nature was revealed when he could save face before his guests at the banquet but was incapable of saving a life, even one he admired.

The great challenge for us is not to live duplicitous lives like Herod but holy and righteous lives like John. We are to be honest and upright in all our dealings with people. We stick to our Christian convictions even when they may be unpopular or place us in an uncomfortable or compromising position.

Juanita and I watched a movie recently called “The Tower Heist” with Ben Stiller, Matthew Broderick and Eddie Murphy. It was a comedy with a message. The character played by Stiller had lost his fellow workers’ pensions when he invested them with a man who later proved to be a crook, much like Kenneth Lay. (Remember ENRON.)

Stiller and his companions devised a plan to steal millions of dollars thought to be in a hidden safe in the Ken Lay character’s penthouse apartment to pay back the now pension-less employees. The plan ultimately succeeded after many unexpected and dramatic twists and turns, but Stiller and his crew were caught. When Stiller’s attorney handed over an incriminating ledger to the FBI that would surely put the investment crook in prison for a long time, Stiller agreed to a two-year prison term himself if all his partners in their Robinhood-like crime were released.

The Feds agreed and the movie ends with the happy employees getting their hard earned money back in the mail, and Stiller walking to his cell in a blue jumpsuit with a big smile on his face.

Sometimes there are consequences we wouldn’t choose for doing the right thing although we probably won’t end up with our heads on a platter. There should be satisfaction and reward internally for doing in our hearts what we know is God’s will both in big things and small things. Jesus said in Luke’s gospel, “If you are faithful in very little, you will also be faithful in much; and if you are dishonest in a very little, you will also be dishonest in much.” (Luke 16:10)

It’s never too late to do the right thing. A clear conscience will enable us to dance for joy before the Lord at nearly all times. AMEN.

