

Romans 12:1-2, 9-21

Mark 10:32-45

March 26, 2017

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

Journey to the Cross

MAY I HAVE THIS DANCE?

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The deejay at our niece's wedding reception was one of the best we've ever heard. He played continuously for four hours, never taking a break. After we finished eating dinner, Nancy and I went out on the dance floor. As the evening wore on, we noticed we were dancing in the midst of a bunch of 20-something young adults. Then we realized our dance moves didn't really fit with the music the deejay was playing. Then we realized we really didn't know the songs the deejay was playing. Then we realized we were out of step, out of sync on the dance floor, in more ways than one. Then we went back to our table and sat down and watched. Oh well, it was fun while it lasted!

In his commentary on the gospel of Mark, Lamar Williamson describes the disciples' lack of understanding when Jesus repeatedly talks about going to Jerusalem to suffer and die. He writes, "The disciples have heard Jesus' words, but they have the music all wrong. They still dance to the world's tune."¹

This morning, as you hear another story from Mark's gospel about Jesus telling his disciples he must go to Jerusalem to die and their misunderstanding, confusion, and inappropriate response, think about Jesus asking, "May I have this dance?" Notice the margin note in today's bulletin next to the Opening Sentences: "When Jesus died for you he was, as it were, inviting you into the dance. He invites you to begin centering everything in your life on him, even as he has given himself for you."²

Will we, like the disciples, continue to dance to the world's tune? Or will we dance with Jesus? Either way we will be out of step, out of sync, either with the world or with Jesus. Which will it be?

We may be much more comfortable dancing to the world's tune, because we already know the steps and moves so well. But dancing that way leads to:

* Peter rebuking Jesus when he talked about going to Jerusalem to die (Mark 8:33). Jesus had to rebuke Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

* The disciples arguing among themselves about who was the greatest (9:34). They must have been ashamed, for when Jesus asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" . . . "they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest."

* James and John asking for positions of authority on Jesus' right and left hands in his earthly kingdom (Mark 10:42-43). Jesus had to remind all of the

disciples that the Gentile rulers lorded it over their subjects and their “great ones” were tyrants.

In other words, when we dance to the world’s tune, we become self-centered and self-seeking. Instead of accepting Jesus’ invitation, we try to make him dance to our own tune. Isn’t that what the devil tried to do when he tempted Jesus to be something other than the Messiah he was meant to be? Isn’t that what Peter tried to do when he scolded Jesus and, we can assume, said something like, “Messiahs don’t suffer and die”? As one writer has put it, “Even worse, the disciples sometimes put themselves at cross purposes with Jesus by trying to educate their teacher about proper messianic behavior.”³

But there’s another tune to dance to, and the refrain goes like this: “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; and after three days he will rise again.” Do we recognize the song? Does it make us want to dance with Jesus? If so, we’ll have to learn a whole new set of dance steps and moves. It may be awkward and difficult, because dancing to this tune means:

- * Deny yourselves, take up your cross, and follow me (Mark 8:34).

- * Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all (Mark 9:35).

- * Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all (Mark 10:43-44).

We don’t often think about Jesus dancing. But what if he did? And what if he invited his followers to join him?

In the second century A.D., numerous tales were written about the adventures of Jesus’ disciples. One is called *The Acts of John*, which contains stories about the missionary activities of John, the son of Zebedee (who appears in today’s gospel story). Near the end of the “book,” John describes what happened on the night before Jesus was arrested and crucified. We know from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John that Jesus ate the Passover meal and washed his disciples’ feet. In *The Acts of John*, John says, “Now, before he was arrested . . . he gathered us all together and said, ‘Before I am delivered up to them, let us sing a hymn to the Father, and go forth to what lies before us.’ So he commanded us to make a circle, holding one another’s hands, and he himself stood in the middle. He said, ‘Respond Amen to me.’ He then began to sing a hymn, and to say, ‘Glory be to you, Father!’ And we circling him said, ‘Amen.’ ‘Glory be to you, Word! Glory be to you, Grace!’ ‘Amen.’ ‘Glory be to you, Spirit! Glory be to you, Holy One! Glory be to the glory!’ ‘Amen.’ ‘We praise you, O Father. We give thanks to you, light, in whom darkness does not abide.’ ‘Amen.’”

The song and the dancing continue, “‘I will pipe, dance all of you!’ ‘Amen.’ ‘The whole universe is dancing above.’ ‘Amen.’ ‘He who does not dance, does not

know what is being done.’ ‘Amen.’ ‘Now if you respond to my dancing, see yourself in me who speak . . . You who dance, perceive what I do.’” John then says, “After this dance, my beloved the Lord went out. . . Even I, when I saw him suffer, did not abide at his passion but fled to the Mount of Olives, weeping over what had taken place. And . . . he was hung upon the cross on Friday, at the sixth hour of the day.”⁴

Scholars think this story might be the basis for an ancient Christian liturgical dance. Dance is often used to describe the dynamic and intimate relationship between God and his people, and even among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The “dance of God” or the “dance of the Holy Trinity” is called *perichoresis*, which means “rotation” or “a going around.” You can hear the word “choreography” in there. Timothy Keller describes that intimate and intertwined relationship of the Trinity this way: “When we delight and serve someone else, we enter into a dynamic orbit around him or her, we center on the interests and desires of the other. That creates a dance, particularly if there are three persons, each of whom moves around the other two . . . None demands that the others revolve around him. Each voluntarily circles the other two, pouring love, delight, and adoration into them . . . That creates a dynamic, pulsating dance of joy and love.”⁵

“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.” (Refrain, Hymn #157, “I Danced in the Morning,” *Glory to God*)

According to the Arthur Murray Dance Centers website, when you dance, you have The Leader and The Follower. The Leader “communicates the patterns of a dance through decisive movement.” The Follower “is sensitive to the signals of a leader and responds accordingly.”

Jesus, the Leader of the dance, sets the patterns of his dance: servanthood, cross-bearing, discipleship, the first must be last, the greatest must be the servant of all.

Jesus, the Leader of the dance, sets the patterns of his dance through decisive movement: on the road to Jerusalem, it is necessary for him to be handed over to die, “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

If Jesus is the Leader of the dance, that makes us the Follower. Who will we dance with? Will we follow the Leader or will we continue to dance to the world’s tune? According to the Arthur Murray instructions, “Leader or follower, whichever role you choose to occupy is, quite literally, your job description on the dance floor. What you do with that responsibility will determine who you can dance with.” Jesus has chosen his job description as the Leader of the dance. He says, “Follow me. Dance like this.” Our job description in the Divine Dance is to

be the followers. The steps are laid out for us, but they're hard to learn. We step all over Jesus' and our own feet. We stumble along. When I was looking for quotes for this week's bulletin margin notes, I Google searched "Jesus, discipleship, cross, follow me." I found a website called BoardofWisdom.com that had this saying of Jesus: "Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant." Underneath this quote I saw this note: "This quote by Jesus of Nazareth is a favorite of 0 users." In other words, lots of time, we'd rather sit out the dance.

But Jesus is a persistent and winsome dance partner. He continues to hold out his nail-scarred hands and invite us into his divine dance of life. In 1883, William B. Sandy published his *Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern*. The collection contained a "traditional" English carol called "Tomorrow Shall Be My Dancing Day." The eleven-verse carol tells the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as a dance, with the chorus, "Sing, oh! my love, oh! my love, my love, my love, This have I done for my true love." His birth and baptism are "to call my true love to my dance." His temptation was "to have me break my true love's dance." The religious and political leaders "judged me to die to lead the dance." He died on the cross "to call my true love to my dance." He rose again on the third day "up to my true love and the dance." He ascended up to heaven where he sits on the right hand of God, "that man may come unto the general dance."⁶

They say that you should always "dance with the one who brung ya." In other words, you should give proper fidelity and faithfulness to those who have gone out of their way to look after you. In 1993, Shania Twain released a popular song called "Dance with the One That Brought You." The chorus says, "You got to dance with the one that brought you, Stay with the one that wants you, The one who's gonna love you when all of the others go home. Don't let the green grass fool you, Don't let the moon get to you. Dance with the one that brought you and you can't go wrong."⁷

Jesus is the one who wants you. Jesus is the one who's gonna love you when all of the others go home. What will you say when Jesus holds out his hand, says "Follow me," and asks, "May I have this dance?"

Dance with Jesus, and you can't go wrong.

Let us pray: God of grace, you have made our minds. Help us to know you. You have made our hearts. Help us to love you. You have made our voices. Help us to sing your praise. You sent Jesus to save us. We praise you and thank you, with words and music and action. Help us join the dance of life. Amen.

NOTES

¹Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), p. 193.

²Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), p. 230.

³David Schnasa Jacobsen, "Between Text and Sermon, Mark 10:1-52," *Interpretation* April 2016, Vol. 70, No. 2, p. 194.

⁴Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 105-106.

⁵Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, p. 224.

⁶"Tomorrow Shall Be My Dancing Day," at www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com.

⁷Shania Twain, "Dance with the One That Brought You" at GooglePlayMusic at www.play.google.com.