

“Let’s Dance”

2 Samuel, chapter 6, relates how King David brings back the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem after it had been captured and held by the enemy. The Ark of the Covenant was a sacred chest, like a portable shrine, that represented to the Hebrews the actual presence of God. It was like the Almighty Himself was coming back to Jerusalem to be with His people.

What a great moment it was! King David puts on a linen ephod – a sleeveless garment worn by a priest. It’s a noisy procession. There’s shouting, praising, and horns blaring, King David is caught up in the exuberance of the occasion: “King David danced before the Lord with all his might” (2 Samuel 6:14). The king is dancing in the streets – notice, “before the Lord.”

David’s wife, Michal, is in the palace. She hears the noise of the religious procession approaching. "As the ark of the Lord came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart" (2 Samuel 6:16).

David continues the celebration. The ark is set in place inside a tent. He offers sacrifices. Food is distributed to everyone. And the people go to their homes. But, boy, does David get it when *he* goes home! "David returned to bless his household. But Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David and said, 'How the king of Israel honored himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants’ maids, as any vulgar fellow might shamelessly uncover himself!'" (2 Samuel 6:20). He comes through the palace door, sweated and happy, still riding high from the pageantry, and he’s met with icy stares from his wife.

Michal is the daughter of the former king, King Saul. Apparently, she thinks David’s behavior is beneath how a king should act. All this cavorting around in public in the name of religion. And she lets him have it! “Well, the mighty king of Israel really made a fool of himself today, dancing half naked in front of all the young women!” Someone has said Michal sounds like the woman at a party whose husband is getting carried away and puts a lampshade over his head, or is doing his favorite bird calls!

David answers Michal with a bit of sarcasm: “I was dancing before the Lord, who was before the Lord, who chose me above your father and all his family! He appointed me as the leader of Israel, the people of the Lord, so I celebrate before the Lord" (2 Samuel 6:21 New Living Translation).

Bruce Larsen has taken this story and done a spinoff from it in his book *Ask Me to Dance*. He talks in this book about how our God longs for each of us to experience wholeness - to become much more than we presently are. He contrasts King David, dancing before the Lord, with Michal and the rest of the crowd: "In the crowd surrounding David are people who by any humanly measurable degree are less sinful than their king. They had trusted God; they had even confessed their sins and been forgiven, (i.e. through the sacrifices just offered) but they are not dancing...they are unable to leap or sing or to experience the exhilaration and freedom that David expresses."

Bruce goes on to say that our "churches (are) filled with...solid, faithful, gray people who never do anything very wrong but who have never experienced the hope in Jesus Christ that enables them to dance in and through life." Yet, he says, these gray people represent a tremendous potential - to be freed by Christ to live life with joy and abandon in spite of making many mistakes.

I think Bruce Larsen is on to something here! We see in our churches people whose faith in Christ liberates them to enjoy God and laugh, to spontaneously reach out to bless and help people, to live with an inner joy that's almost like dancing! But we also see people whose religion makes them stodgy and judgmental - negative, inhibited, dull.

Which are you? Which am I? "And David danced before the Lord with all his might" (2 Samuel 6:14).

I want to make just 2 main points in this message: ***Number one: Faith is like dancing!*** Faith is dancing with God in your life. The Bible talks a lot about the joy we can have when we follow Jesus. Jesus Himself said He wants *His joy* to be in us! Jesus described the kingdom of God in images that are colorful and merry. He said the kingdom of God is like a feasting at a big banquet or being invited to a wedding. Where God's kingdom is present - where God rules - there is exhilarating joy!

Faith is like dancing! Let's look at Matthew 11:16-19. "But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

Jesus said you can't please the people of His generation. John the Baptizer came as an ascetic, with a stern message of judgment, and was rejected. (Now judgment *is* an authentic component of faith - but the judgment is only on those who choose not to accept God's gift of life and salvation). Jesus came living a spontaneous and joyful life, and He was accused of being a drunk and hanging out with sinners. Jesus was a Dancer, rejected by those whose religion was doleful.

Other places in the Bible tell us that having faith is like dancing! Psalm 30:11 says, "You have turned my mourning into joyful *dancing*. You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy." Psalm 150:4 says, "Praise (the Lord) with tambourine and *dancing*." *Having God in our life, worship Him and putting Him first, puts us to dancing!*

Now let me interrupt this sermon with an announcement! I'll bet some of you are thinking, "Harry, c'mon. This is not a sermon I need today. I'm here with a heavy heart; I'm grieving. Or, this is not a great time in my life. I'm really struggling. I sure don't feel like dancing." I know. I get it. Life isn't one continual frolic in the sunshine wearing a happy face. We grieve. We worry. We get discouraged. We hurt. *Actually there's something wrong with a person who's*

giddy and smiling all the time. But when we're a real follower of Jesus, and we live by faith in Him, His joy is in us - even in the rough times. It's an "in spite of" joy. And we can dance sometimes, even if we are dancing with tears in our eyes.

"And David danced before the Lord with all his might" (2 Samuel 6:14). God wants to liberate us through Christ to live life to the fullest - to be freed to enjoy God and love others even though we make mistakes and are far from perfect. I remember the words of a musical that a choir in one of the churches I served performed. The words are: "You don't have to be lovely to be loved, you don't have to be perfect to be free; You don't have to have the answers All you have to have is faith."

Turn from your sins. Accept God's gift of new life in Christ. Make Jesus and His will the heart and center of your life. And don't be afraid to dance in the Lord!

This brings me to the second main point of this message: ***The church is the place where we ought to be learning to dance!*** The atmosphere in our churches ought to help free us to live life in Christ with joyful abandon! (Like the church is kind of like a spiritual dance studio!).

There was a cartoon once in *The New Yorker* magazine where 2 men were standing on a corner across from a church. It was Sunday, noon, and people were coming out of church, cheering, laughing, arms in the air. Some are dancing. In the middle of it all some are carrying out their pastor, still in his robe, on their shoulders. Seeing this, one of the men on the street corner says to the other, "I wonder what he preached about!" Coming to church should put joy in our hearts! Inspire us to change and grow! To be all that God wants us to be! To be a blessing to others!

But church often doesn't do that. Bruce Larsen, again in his book *Ask Me To Dance*, tells of a group of Greek Christians touring Britain, and how they reacted to the Church of England services they attended. One of the Greek tourists said, "In our country we come to church feeling happy. We greet our friends and we go inside to worship with a sense of freedom. Here, you march up to the church looking grim and greeting no one. You behave inside like soldiers on parade, sitting in rows with your eyes to the front, all getting up and sitting down together at the word of command from your superior officer." If as a pastor, I make church like that, forgive me, and help me get over it! I hope church is a place where we can come and be ourselves, and if something funny or unexpected happens, that we can do the natural thing, and *laugh*.

This reminds me of the time I was invited into someone's home as a guest for a meal. I was very nervous and ill at ease. We were sitting in the kitchen eating, and there was a lady's dress on a hanger on the kitchen door. All of a sudden some underwear dropped out from underneath the dress and fell on the floor. Well, I didn't know what to do. I was so inhibited, I didn't want to laugh. And yet I was cracking up inside with laughter. So I pretended like I hadn't seen it. Finally, someone broke the ice by bursting out laughing. Sometimes that's the way we can be in church.

Erma Bombeck was a columnist with a great sense of humor. One of her columns was this (in part): "In church the other Sunday I was intent on a small child who was turning around smiling at everyone. He wasn't gurgling, spitting, humming, kicking, tearing the hymnals or rummaging through his Mother's handbag. He was just smiling. Finally, his Mother jerked him about and in a stage whisper that could be heard in a little theatre off Broadway said, 'Stop that grinning! You're in church!' With that, she gave him a belt on his hindside and as the tears rolled down his cheeks added, 'That's better,' and returned to her prayers.

"What must they think, these children...we sing, 'Make a joyful noise unto the Lord' while our faces reflect the sadness of one who has just buried a rich Aunt who left everything to her pregnant hamster. We chant, 'If I have not love, I am become a sounding brass or a tinkling symbol.' Translated in the parking lot it come out, 'And the same to you, fella!' Suddenly I was angry...I wanted to grab this child with the tear-stained face close to me and tell him about my God. The happy God. The smiling God. The God who had to have a sense of humor to have created the likes of us. I wanted to tell him he is an understanding God who understands little children who pick their noses in church because they're bored...He even understands my shallow prayers that implore, 'If you can't make me thin, then make my friends look fat.' What a fool, I thought. Here was a woman sitting next to the only light left to our Civilization...the only hope, our only miracle...if he couldn't smile in church, where was there left to go?"

Now of course, I'm not suggesting that we be slaphappy and frivolous in our worship of the King of kings and Lord of lords. That this is Sunday Morning Comedy Hour. But don't you think there should be more warmth and joy here in the Father's house than there is in the neighborhood bar!

The church ought to be a place where we help each other to dance in the Lord! Not just in our worship, but in our fellowship, in our outreach. To laugh with one another. To cry with one another. To encourage rather than criticize one another. To love each other with an abundance of mercy and grace thrown in.

I have to admit that, for me, dancing has probably brought more embarrassment than pleasure. I went to Jr. Hi dances and had some fun, but remember stepping on girls feet a lot. By high school I had become more strait-laced and legalistic in my faith, and dancing was a no-no. (Other than square dancing, for some reason). So I stopped going to school dances and missed out on the fun. Eventually I got over that, and figured it's okay to dance, but the end result is that I'm a lousy dancer. It's only since I've been married, in the privacy of our home, where Nancy loves me unconditionally, and forgives me if I step on her toes, that I do some movements that in some way resemble a dance.

Maybe this is a parable of the church: where we can relax and be ourselves, and still be loved, where we forgive one another if we occasionally step on someone else's toes, that makes this a warm and safe place for us to learn to dance with the Lord and with one another. A place where we can be freed to be more the person God wants us to be.

"And David danced before the Lord with all his might" (2 Samuel 6:14). The good news of the gospel is that Jesus comes to every one of us and says, "C'mon. Let's dance!"

