

From the Pulpit

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“Let’s Dance”

Matthew, Chapter 28, Verses 16 through 20

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dan Clark,
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Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

L: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

P: Thanks be to God.

Do you like to dance? Have you ever gone line dancing? Have you taken lessons – learned ballroom or swing or salsa? Did you take ballet as a child? Or maybe you limit your dancing to the chicken dance or the hokey pokey at a wedding? Hey, Macarena!

So, how does one learn to dance? We learn to dance by imitation and by repetition. This is how children learn for sure. In cultures where dance is still extremely

important – for example, the African villages I’ve spent time in over the last decade – children are not taught to drum and dance. They don’t register for a class. They don’t learn the electric slide in middle school PE. They don’t learn disco moves from video games. In dancing cultures, children learn to drum and dance even before they can walk and talk by being with their parents as their parents drum and dance. I once saw an infant tied to her mother’s back in a village in Ghana tapping in perfect time to the beat while much of the village joined in the typical Sunday afternoon drumming and dancing activities – it was amazing! This kid had rhythm!

Do you like to dance?

When Jesus at age 30 started his teacher-student relationships with 12 young men – fishermen, a tax collector, a zealot, a hothead – these were 12 young faithful and curious Jews – his invitation to them was simple. Let’s walk. Let’s walk. Well, in our biblical account, the words Jesus said are ‘Follow me.’ And then they started to walk.

When Jesus invited his disciples to follow him, it was a simple invitation to walk with him. It was not an invitation to know doctrine inside and out. It wasn’t even an invitation to have impeccable character. Instead, it was an invitation to walk with Jesus. And more specifically, it was an invitation to walk where Jesus walked. It was an invitation to imitate his moves.

Jesus said, let’s walk.

And with this invitation a relationship was formed. It was the ancient system that connected a rabbi and an apprentice. This was more than a teacher-student relationship. The connection between a rabbi and an apprentice, or a disciple, could last for decades. The connection was deeply relational, highly experiential, and enduring.

And just like a child learning to dance, the apprentices would imitate and emulate their rabbi. Stepping where he stepped. Walking how he walked. Saying and doing and thinking and feeling the same kinds of things that their teacher was saying and doing and thinking and feeling.

Martha Graham, the greatest dancer and choreographer of the 20th century, said “I believe that we learn by practice. Whether it means to learn to dance by practicing dancing or to learn to live by practicing living, the principles are the same. In each, it is the performance of a dedicated precise set of acts, physical or intellectual, from which comes shape of achievement, a sense of one's being, a satisfaction of spirit. One becomes, in some area, an athlete of God. Practice means to perform, over and over again in the face of all obstacles, some act of vision, of faith, of desire. Practice is a means of inviting the perfection desired.”

And so they learned to dance. They watched the footwork and learned the moves of Jesus. They became athletes of God.

In three years time, this ensemble of 12 apprentices had learned the steps of their rabbi Jesus, and the crew had grown into a flashmob... there were crowds of people following Jesus by the thousands. These were crowds full of need... full of suffering and disease... full of sick and sickening people... Basically, these flashmobs, these crowds were ordinary people – people like you and me – people with stuff – with issues and hurts and doubt and pain. But they were all learning the steps of this new dance. Jesus was teaching them to love.

But things changed drastically. Jesus was restrained by chaperones who refused to tap their toe to the beat. (And that's putting it lightly.) Jesus was hunted down by the sentinels of the system of oppression and violence. He was executed, but then God did the unthinkable deed... and overcame death with life, overcame silence with sound, overcame murder with music and movement, overcame the dirge with a dance of faith, hope, and love.

And this is where we pick up the story from today's reading in Matthew 28, commonly known as The Great Commission. After three years of apprenticeship, Jesus clearly lays out what is next for his dancing disciples.

And what is next for them?

Mountain climbing.

Yes, mountain climbing. *"The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them."* I can tell you, it is difficult to dance at altitude. Here we are in Columbus, Ohio, at 700 or 800 feet above sea level. But just this week, I was in Colorado... so add 5 or 6 or 7,000 feet to your elevation and your lungs tighten up. I've even tried to dance at altitude. It's not easy. When I've traveled in the southern mountain villages of Ethiopia, villages that sit at 8 and 10,000 feet above sea level, every day ends with singing and dancing around cooking fires. Mountain climbing is not easy. Mountain dancing is near impossible for us lowlanders.

But that's what is next for Jesus's apprentices. They go to the mountain. And they are carrying extra baggage on their climb. How do we know this? Scripture tells us that *"when they saw him, they worshipped him... but some doubted."* Sounds to me like all of them worshipped him. All of them were moved by the glory and grace of their loving teacher. But some of these worshippers were also doubters, these postures apparently not being mutually exclusive. I can relate, being a doubting worshipper myself. Perhaps they started their mountain climbing expedition by being honest with themselves, with each other, with God. Perhaps they were honest about the fact that they were carrying pain and fear and questions and doubts in the packs on their backs. Perhaps they felt the weight of it all. Perhaps performing the dance steps of faith, hope, and love they had learned over the years from Jesus became more difficult with the heavy challenges of new and different times.

But they are not left there alone, exposed to the elements on the north face of a rugged mountain. Instead, they are met there by Jesus. Not only the worshippers, but also the doubting worshippers... and the worshipping doubters too. Jesus came to them. It could make a good slogan for a church: “Everyone worships. Some of us doubt. Jesus is here.”

And then, in this Great Commission, Jesus offers a reprise to his initial invitation. At first he said, let’s walk. Step where I step. Move how I move. At first, Jesus invited his apprentices into a dance of faith, hope, and love. Now, he commissions them to teach others to walk, to step, to move, to dance. “*Go and make disciples.*”

Matthew 28, again, says, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*”

“*The name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*” That is to say, the realm and authority, the way and the work and the word of the Creator, the Christ, and the Spirit. Today, on the liturgical calendar, is Trinity Sunday. The Sunday after Pentecost has been set aside as a Feast Day to celebrate the Triune nature of the Christian God. The Trinity is one of the most fascinating – and controversial – and mysterious of Christian beliefs. It has been said that “mystery is not a wall to run up against, but an ocean in which to swim.” The common wisdom is that if you talk about the Trinity for longer than a few minutes you will slip into heresy because you are probing the depths of God too deeply.

While one of the traps of the doctrine of the Trinity is the assignment of gender to a God who is wholly other, Trinity Sunday is not a day for hierarchy or

authoritarianism. This is not a day for patriarchy or misogyny in religion. This is a day... for dance.

Yes, dance. Dancing in ancient Palestine, dancing on mountain climbs. Dancing with faith, hope, and love... today, here and now. Following Jesus and responding to his Great Commission is about dance. Walking where Jesus walks. Stepping where Jesus steps. Moving how Jesus moves. Discipleship is a dance.

And the Trinity is a dance, too.

The ancient theological word is perichoresis, a term in Christian theology first found within the Church Mothers and Fathers of the first centuries, but now reinvigorated among contemporary theologians and thinkers. The term first appears in Gregory of Nazianzus but was explored more fully in the work of John of Damascus. It refers to the mutual inter-penetration and indwelling within the threefold nature of the Trinity, God the Creator, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

Perichoresis is a compound noun from the Greek... *peri-* meaning around, and *chorein* meaning to contain.

Jesus lived with this interrelated intimacy and compares this mystery of the Triune God to what is possible when people connect with one another and with God. It is summed up in the motto of the United Church of Christ, actually, taken from the gospel of John: "*That they all may be one.*"

The Triune God relates and operates in ways that are creative and social, interrelated and interconnected, missional and mutual... in a word, with dance. God is dancing. And God invites us to step and move and walk and climb and dance with God. As Jesus commissioned his apprentices on that Galilean mountain, this is what he was inviting them to. Jesus said, let's dance. He said, I've taught you how to move, now teach others to move to the music of the love of God. Walk

where I walk. Step where I step. Move how I move. Love how I love. Let's dance.
Amen.

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