

The Lord in the Dance

Jeremiah 31:7-14, Ephesians 1:3-14

Sermon by Mark Schloneger

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This is what the Lord says:

*“Sing with joy for Jacob;
shout for the foremost of the nations.
Make your praises heard, and say,
‘Lord, save your people,
the remnant of Israel.’*

*See, I will bring them from the land of the north
and gather them from the ends of the earth.
Among them will be the blind and the lame,
expectant mothers and women in labor;
a great throng will return.*

*They will come with weeping;
they will pray as I bring them back.*

*I will lead them beside streams of water
on a level path where they will not stumble,
because I am Israel’s father,
and Ephraim is my firstborn son.*

*“Sing with joy for Jacob;
shout for the foremost of the nations.
Make your praises heard, and say,
‘Lord, save your people,
the remnant of Israel.’*

*“Hear the word of the Lord, you nations;
proclaim it in distant coastlands:
‘[The Lord] who scattered Israel will gather them
and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.’
For the Lord will deliver Jacob
and redeem them from the hand of those
stronger than they.*

*They will come and shout for joy on the heights of
Zion;*

*they will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord—
the grain, the new wine and the olive oil,
the young of the flocks and herds.*

*They will be like a well-watered garden,
and they will sorrow no more.*

*Then young women will dance and be glad,
young men and old as well.*

*I will turn their mourning into gladness;
I will give them comfort and joy instead of
sorrow.*

*I will satisfy the priests with abundance,
and my people will be filled with my bounty,”
declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 31:7-14, NIV)*

The following quotations were printed in Mennonite church publications.

From an article published on July 29, 1909.

*A subject which is of near kin to theatrical morals,
is that of morality in the ball-room. . . . “*

*[T]he Chief of Police of a great American city [said]
that the downfall of three-fourths of its outcast women
was due to dancing. . . .*

*The ball-room blunts the moral susceptibilities,
fosters the sensual, and ruins spirituality.¹*

¹ Alfred S. Dwyer “Ball Room Morality,” (Gospel Herald vol. 2, July 22, 1909), 262.

From a poem published on June 16, 1921.

*The evils that will sting and mar
And leave a black and ugly scar,
Are from the devil and his hosts,
And of these crimes old Satan boasts. . .*

*A mother's son, pride, life, and joy
Soon turns to be a drinking boy;
Her sad heart aches, she prays for him,
But dancing leads him further in.*

*Until in some prison far away,
He passes from this life away,
Lo Satan's large and spacious cell,
He found that dancing leads to hell.²*

From an article published on August 19, 1947.

*[No study of [dancing] can be adequate
that does not open-mindingly view it from all angles,
and when that is done,
the whole business must be placed on the wrong side of the ledger. . .
The enjoyment of music, rhythm, and companionship
can be right and legitimate,
but get them in some other way and place
than on the dance floor.³*

Today, it's easy to laugh at this hand-wringing over dancing,
but we shouldn't forget that it represented a concern for faithfulness,
and at least some of the concern
had to do with the things associated with dancing,
not dancing itself.

Still, for a church tradition that emphasizes the importance
of following Jesus with our bodies
in service, in suffering, even to the point of martyrdom,
it's both ironic and sad that it often has forbidden --
or at least has had a hard time accepting --
people expressing joy with their bodies . . . in dance.

Now, a disclaimer:

Wider culture has had some influence

on Mennonite attitudes concerning dancing.

These attitudes are not found in all Mennonites or in all Mennonite church traditions.

To learn more about the breadth of Mennonite worship practices that include dancing,

² Esther B. Detwiler, "Dancing" (poem), Gospel Herald, vol 14 (June 16, 1921).

³ Coffman Shenk, "What about Dancing?" Gospel Herald v. 40 (August 19, 1947).

consult any convention of Mennonite Church USA
or Mennonite World Conference.

Even admitting all of these things, though,
when it comes to dancing as an expression of worship,
all the churches of which I've been a part,
have had trouble embracing it beyond watching
a rare liturgical dance performance.
And that's true for a lot of churches, not just Mennonite ones.

There may not be rules against dancing,
but I think they live, we live, I live, with a discomfort about it
that has been passed down for generations.

It makes me wonder:
Does the restraint we feel or collectively impose
when it comes to dancing
reflect a restraint we feel or collectively impose
when it comes to discipleship, particularly in expressing joy?

Put another way, does it represent a reluctance to welcome
and joyfully live into the fulfillment of God's promises in Jesus
with our whole selves -- our bodies, minds, and souls?

I confess, I don't feel like the right person to preach about joy this week,
and I've never felt like the right person to preach about dancing,
The truth is, I often feel a sense of sadness during the holidays,
and I struggle with that because I don't think that's how I should feel.
(And so, in my wisdom, I sometimes add a touch of shame
to garnish my sadness).

But that's how I've felt this past week.
I certainly have not felt like dancing,
and the unrelentingly oppressive reality of COVID
and the unrelentingly oppressive reality of gray skies . . .
have not helped.

But maybe, the best time to consider joy, its origin, and how it's expressed,
is when you are not feeling particularly joyful.

Jeremiah is often called the weeping prophet.
That's because he mourned over the fate of his people
even as he announced God's judgment upon them.
But the verses before us from Jeremiah, chapter 31
are a part of two-chapter section called the Book of Comfort.
This is a collection of promises made by God
to exiles living in Babylon in the sixth century BCE.
These words fell upon people whose future hung in the balance,

who were unsure about God's presence, God's providence,
and, maybe, even God's goodness.

To these people, Jeremiah not only declared God's comfort and compassion,
he gave them a vision of the end of their weeping and mourning in exile
and the beginning of their joyful singing and dancing
upon their return home to Jerusalem.

And as if we could miss the profound embodiment of joy in this passage,
the prophet declares that even those with physical limitations --
the lame, the pregnant and the blind—
will be a part of the joyful procession home.⁴

These words, God's words, do not wither away once uttered.
They actually prompt the very situation that they describe.
God's word brings into being what they say.
Let there be light, God said, and there was light.

A 2010 study suggests that babies, from birth, have a predisposition
to move rhythmically in response to music.⁵

Do you get what this means?

It means that people have to be taught *not* to dance.

We have to learn *not* to respond with joy in our bodies.

From a missionary update printed in 1891 in another Mennonite publication.

*G. G. Matheson . . . held special revival meetings in a district
where there was great indifference about religious things. . . .
The result was 60 persons professed to have been converted. . . .
When they entered the place on Saturday evening
they found that the young people had arranged for a dance,
but before the time came . . . ,
the leaders were converted, and, instead of dancing,
they were praising God.*⁶

Instead of dancing, they were praising God.

It's shame, isn't it?

People responding to the good news of Jesus, the Word made flesh,
had to be taught that dancing was inconsistent with praising God.

Look, this message isn't about dancing, not specifically at least.

It's about joy, about God's joy embodied in Jesus, the Word made flesh,
and about our joy embodied in response.

⁴ Frank M. Yamada, "Living by the Word: Reflections on the Lectionary," *The Christian Century* 125:26 (Dec. 30 2008), 18. <https://web.p.ebscohost.com/>.

⁵ University of York. "Babies are born to dance, new research shows," *Science Daily* (March 16, 2010). <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/03/100315161925.htm>.

⁶ "The Young People." *The Mennonite* 6 (1891) 142.

I get it. It's hard right now.

We wonder, how can we be joyful in times like this?

How can I be joyful when I don't *feel* joyful?

Sometimes, it's important to remember that our belief in God
is less important than God's belief in us.

Before Judah's exile, Jeremiah's words of comfort would have sounded unnecessary.

When the Babylonians surrounded Judah's gates,

Jeremiah's words of comfort would have sounded empty.

When the people of Judah were first carried off into exile,

Jeremiah's words of comfort would have sounded ridiculous.

But God's word does not depend on our circumstances.

It does not depend on our assessment of our situation.

No, God's word brings into being that which it describes.⁷

Barbara Brown Taylor writes,

"The only condition for joy is the presence of God.

Joy happens when God is present and people know it."⁸

And that means it can happen in the midst of exile,

in the midst of a pandemic,

in the midst of grief,

in the midst of a long, gray winter,

or, maybe, in the midst of other people expressing joy.

On Christmas day, we traveled to be with Sarah's family in Converse, Indiana.

There was a white elephant gift exchange,

and everyone brought a gift

that was to cost more than five dollars.

Expectations were pretty low on what you'd receive,

and the gifts did not exceed those expectations.

I don't know exactly why it happened,

maybe it was just the joy of us being all together,

but we clapped in unison as the first person unwrapped their gift,

and then we cheered when it was revealed.

And then we started doing that more and more for each of the fifteen gifts that followed.

It got to the point when we were leaping up out of our chairs, pumping our fists,

laughing and yelling at the top of our lungs for each trifling five-dollar gift.

When that exchange ended, Sarah's mother opened the gifts given just for her.

When she unwrapped three gray sweatshirts in a row,

we jumped up, cheered, and high-fived each other

as if they were gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

⁷ John B. Rogers, Jr., "Expository Article: Jeremiah 31:7-14," *Interpretation* (1988), 284.

⁸ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Surprised by Joy," *The Living Pulpit* 5:4 (October-November 1996), 21.

It's was utterly ridiculous, but it was utterly joyful.
I smile just thinking about it.

That, I think, is a good metaphor for how we spur each other towards joy
in our bodies.

In Christ, we have a message of good news that will cause great joy for all the people.

We carry that message with our bodies
and this good news, this joy, is not just for others.
It's for us too.

This week, consider how you joyfully embody that message.

Or, if you just aren't feeling joyful right now
do something utterly ridiculous -
do a little dance, go outside, yell at the top of your lungs,
or, simply, allow other people to carry your joy until you can carry it again.

To close, I'm going to read from Ephesians chapter 1, verses 3 to 14.

This is a message of great joy, and so I invite you to clap together in unison as I read it.
If you feel like it, you can let out little cheers while I read,
and then at the end, when I say, "This is the Word of God for the people of God,"
I want you to erupt.

From The Message.

How blessed is God!

And what a blessing [God] is!

*[God] is the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ,
and takes us to the high places of blessing in him.*

*Long before [God] laid down earth's foundations,
[God] had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love,
to be made whole and holy by his love.*

Long, long ago [God] decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ.

(What pleasure [God] took in planning this!)

*[God] wanted us to enter into the celebration
of [this] lavish gift-giving by the hand of [God's] beloved Son.*

*Because of the sacrifice of the Messiah,
his blood poured out on the altar of the Cross,
we're a free people—free of penalties and punishments
chalked up by all our misdeeds.*

And not just barely free, either.

Abundantly free!

*[God] thought of everything,
provided for everything we could possibly need,
letting us in on the plans he took such delight in making.*

[God] set it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan

*in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him,
everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth.*

It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for.

*Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up,
he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living,
part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone.*

It's in Christ that you, once you heard the truth and believed it . . . ,

found yourselves home free—signed, sealed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit.

*This down payment from God is the first installment on what's coming,
a reminder that we'll get everything God has planned for us,
a praising and glorious life. (Ephesians 3:1-14, The Message)*

In Christ, this is the word of God for the people of God.

Praise be to God!