

Between Mourning and Dancing

Isaiah 40:28-31; Psalm 30; Mark 1:29-39

Whitefish UMC

February 4, 2012

- † It's been a week of emotional and spiritual whiplash, at least for our family. On Tuesday, after holding it together for almost a week to carry out my pastoral duties, my heart and spirit were so heavy, it felt as if I were living under water. Without Eva, it was (as Tom said) as if a wall of our home had been torn out.
- † Sometime in the middle of the night, around 3:00 a.m. Wednesday, I woke with a start. All I could think of to do was pray, and so I did—for you, for my family, and especially for our son and daughter (in-law) and their still-in-the-womb baby. When I finally got up, I checked my phone by habit, and there was a text from our son saying: “Sam is in labor.” The time of the text was 3:12 a.m.
- † After receiving the green light to head down to Missoula to the hospital, we headed south, and I made calls. I called people to cover my duties for the next couple of days. I notified family members. When my sister Sally called back, she congratulated us on the immanent birth of our longed-for grandbaby.
- † But then she said, with a quaver in her voice, “Please urge Sam and Carey to bank the baby's cord blood for a possible stem cell transplant down the road. The specialists have just conclusively determined that Griffin (her two and a-half-year old son—twin of Sophie) has cerebral palsy, and we are going to

try to get him into an experimental trial at Duke where they will do a stem-cell transplant.”

- † As excited as I was about our grandbaby, I couldn't get little Griffin out of my mind. The next few hours brought amazingly wonderful joy as I was blessed to witness the birth of our healthy, beautiful, granddaughter; yet my sister's voice, and images little Griffin, with his therapeutic boot and relatively un-used left hand shadowed the bright gladness.
- † Let me be clear: I tell you these things not because they are unique or so special just because it's about our family. I share this story because I believe it is your story, too. You have weeks like this one—maybe this last week was an emotional and spiritual roller-coaster ride for you, too. Or maybe you took your turn awhile ago, or it's just around the corner.
- † Does it help to know that we are not the first people to experience the challenge of moving from mourning to dancing and in between? The Bible tells of many of our ancestors in the faith who have struggled with the same dilemma. The gospel for today describes how Jesus entered a rhythm of worship, healing, teaching, and prayer, which provided a blueprint for his ministry.
- † In today's passage we find Jesus and his disciples in the synagogue, where they had prayed and worshipped together. They go to Peter's home, perhaps for a meal, only to find that Peter's mother-in-law is ill with a fever. Jesus takes her by the hand (notice the intimacy of this gesture) and lifts her up and heals her. In her gratitude, she begins to serve them.
- † Others hear of this healing and crowd around him, and Jesus heals them. Then, to regain his strength, he steals away in the dark to pray alone. His disciples find him, and together they go into the Galilee to proclaim the message God has sent him to share. This pattern repeats itself again and

again in the gospels. The details change, but not the fundamental rhythm of worship, healing, teaching, prayer, and proclaiming the message.

- † And what is this message? Jesus, through parables, stories, teaching, and example lives his life as a metaphor for the kingdom of God. He and his disciples eat together, celebrating the Sabbath, and the other rituals of their faith. They heal the sick, feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, and restore people to the life God has dreamt for them. But they don't "minister" to others without ceasing.
- † They also seek time alone to pray; they drop deep into the well of joy that God's presence provides. Their days are filled with successes and failures, celebration and mourning—all existing with the demands of their mission.
- † But even though Jesus the healer brings wholeness and life to those who open their lives to his presence, we know that in our lives Jesus doesn't make all our pain, loneliness, or suffering go away.
- † Throughout our lives, we still grieve. We still encounter obstacles. We have a hard time turning our mourning into dancing especially when life throws roadblocks at us that we don't expect! Maybe it is an unexpected death, an unexpected diagnosis, or whatever life may throw at us! The reality is that God doesn't cast out the demons that we wish would run screaming away from our own lives or those we love. God doesn't remove the suffering from our lives or our beloved's life. Yet God truly does help us heal and turns our mourning into dancing. God's role continues to be that of healing and restoration for all God's people. God loves and cares for each of us!
- † Well-known author and theologian Henri Nouwen in his book *Turn My Mourning Into Dancing* writes, "We still ache in grief when death visits those we love or flinch when it approaches us, of course. We will suffer in many ways. But our pangs will be more like labor pains that bring new life--

that bring into our world a new life. Facing death allows us to experience that life in a way our denial never can permit. Inviting God into our grief will mean we will never walk alone. We will come to know that God has the ultimate power over death.”

† Nouwen writes, “The hardships we all endure require more than words, of course, even spiritual words. Eloquent phrases cannot soothe our deep pain. But we do find something to lead and guide us through. We hear an invitation to allow our mourning to become a place of healing, and our sadness a way through pain to dancing. We learn to look fully into our losses, not evade them. By greeting life’s pains with something other than denial we may find something unexpected. By inviting God into our difficulties we ground life---even its sad moments---in joy and hope.”

† Nouwen goes on to say that the mourning and the dancing become one in a life lived in God’s Spirit. “The mystery of the dance is that its movements are discovered in the mourning. The dance does not simply follow the grief; it finds its origin in the grieving itself. Look at the flowers painted by Vincent van Gogh. What grief, what sadness, what melancholy! Yet what joy, what beauty, what ecstasy! Looking at them, who can say where the mourning ends and the dance begins? They are never separated. Mourning calls for dancing, dancing for mourning, and in this mysterious duel that has become a duet, Vincent celebrates life.”

† “To heal is to teach people to dance in the awareness that their many losses, when mourned deeply, are the bases for the choreography of their dance. Mourning makes us poor, creates inner emptiness, brings us to our nothingness. But it is precisely there that the dancer rises up and takes the first steps. “Blessed are those who mourn.” Jesus does not say, “Blessed are those who console the mourner.” No, he says, “You are blessed *in* your

mourning.” There is the place where the Spirit brings you new life. There is the creche where the Child is born in you. There is the broken soil of your soul where the seed of grace can grow in you.”

- † And so in weeks like this past one, and in our roller coaster, whiplash lives, may we, too, enter the rhythms of worship, service, prayer, and celebration—as we live between mourning and dancing. God is in each part of our lives, calling us to become healers with Christ for each other and for the world. We do it when we weep together, pray together, eat together, and dance together.
- † When we sing God’s praise in joyful abandon and cry out in lament in the darkness of the night—we live in the dancing and mourning of the Spirit. We live in what C. S. Lewis so aptly described as “shadowlands.”
- † So in the midst of these shadowlands of our life, what are we to do? Shortly before his death, Lewis concluded an interview with these thoughts: *“The world might stop in ten minutes; meanwhile, we are to go on doing our duty of love. The great thing is to be found at one’s post a child of God, living each day as if it were our last, but planning as though our world might last a hundred years.”*
- † What if we were to live like that, knowing that God is our loving shepherd, the constant through the shadowlands of green pastures, still waters, and dark death valleys? Henri Nouwen, who knew so much about living amidst suffering and joy in the manner of Jesus concludes:
- † “Jesus came to sing a dirge and says: ‘Cry with me.’ Jesus came to play a pipe and says: ‘Dance with me.’ Our marketplace is as wide as the world. It is up to us to make it the stage upon which the immense beauty of God’s love can be shown.”

- † Isaiah writes, and we sing: “Those that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength—they shall mount up on wings of eagles—they shall run and not be weary—they shall walk and not faint.” Jesus gives us the living witness to this truth. And with the Spirit’s help, our lives will bear witness to it too.
- † And so we hear Jesus’ invitation to the table of remembrance and hope—of mourning and dancing. For it was on the night that he gave himself up for us that he....Amen.

Sources:

Henri Nouwen, “The Duet of the Holy Spirit: When Mourning and Dancing are One.” <http://www.michaelmalloy.org>

“Mourning into Dancing,” <http://prayingontheprairie.blogspot.com>

C. S. Lewis, A Grief Observed, 1961.