

So You Think You Can't Dance

Trinity Sunday, May 30, 2010

Psalm 8, Proverbs 8, Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

- † Unless you've sworn off television, you know that the small screen boasts several programs showcasing outstanding dance performances. And they are a big deal these days. Lest you think I am exaggerating, some of our Leadership meetings have ended early so members could make it home on time for an important episode of *Dancing With the Stars*.
- † How many shows are there in the current schedule? Besides *Dancing With the Stars*, consider *America's Best Dance Team*, *Step Up and Dance*, and the inspiration for the title of this sermon: *So You Think You Can Dance*? Add to that the terrific choreography on the popular *Glee*, and you can't escape it. America, apparently, has dance fever.
- † If that's the case, why, then, is dancing such a stumbling block in many relationships? How many couples do you know for whom dancing is an issue? One loves to dance, yet the other refuses it. Dancing becomes an obstacle between parents and children, sometimes. It even causes dissention in certain churches!
- † But why should we care, and what difference does it make? Today, as you've already heard, is Trinity Sunday, a day when we try to make sense of a major doctrine of the church. Eugene Peterson says that the Trinity is "the centerpiece of Christian theology and sometimes considered the most subtle and abstruse of all doctrines." ([Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places](#)).

- † Even though you are wonderful, courteous people, I can see your eyes beginning to glaze over. What could this possibly have to do with my daily life, you wonder. And you are right to do so.
- † What difference does it make in claiming that there are three persons and one essence of God, not just God being called different things at different times? What's at stake in claiming there is **one** God, not three? What's at stake in insisting that Jesus is of one substance with the Father/Creator and not just a really good guy who got a promotion?
- † Another way of asking these questions is to ask: What kind of life does the Trinity shape? Back to our neighbor Eugene Peterson again—he reminds us that “our Greek theological ancestors used the term *perichoresis* to describe the Trinity.” And *perichoresis* is the Greek word for dance. Peterson asks us to imagine a folk dance with three partners in each set.
- † The music starts up and the partners holding hands begin moving in a circle. On a signal from the caller, they release hands, change partners, and weave in and out, swinging first one and then another. The music picks up speed, the partners move faster, with and between and among one another, swinging and twirling, embracing and releasing, holding on and letting go.
- † There is no confusion, every movement is cleanly coordinated in precise rhythms, as each person maintains his or her own identity. To the observer, it's impossible sometimes to distinguish one person from another as the dance increases in tempo. The steps are so intricate that it is difficult to anticipate the actual configurations as they appear.
- † Remember that strange word *perichoresis*? Peri=around; choresis=dance (the same root as choreography). Peterson concludes that this metaphor for the Trinity, a subtle and abstruse doctrine, can be observed by anyone in an American neighborhood barn dance or an Celtic contra dance.

- † Well, maybe, you say. But I can't dance! Think again. Yes YOU CAN!
- † “We are baptized in the name of the Trinity. Our Christian lives are an immersion in the triune God, God the Father/Creator, God the Son/Redeemer, God the Spirit/Sustainer. We are shaped by this triune life. We are now participants in the company of the God who creates heaven and earth, who enters history and establishes salvation as its definitive action, and who forms a community to worship and give witness to God's words and work.”
- † What kind of life does the Trinity shape? Lives that are a personal response to a personal God that calls forth participation in community—and doesn't rest on personal salvation alone. It DOES make a difference that God is three persons—Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit—and one **substance**. What is that substance?
- † You learned it early on, but you can't hear it too often. God is LOVE. God is relationship, a dance of connection and release, of give and take. And we can only know God by personal response that is a participation of that relationship of our Triune God in community.
- † Hear Peterson again: “God is nothing if not personal and can only be known by personal response. We cannot know God through impersonal abstractions or in solitary isolation. The only way God reveals God's self is personally. Never impersonally as a force or an influence, never abstractly as an idea or truth or principle.”
- † “We cannot live as spectators of the dance of the Trinity. A hand reaches out to pull us into the Trinitarian actions of holy creation, holy salvation, and holy community. There are no nonparticipants in a Trinity-revealed life...God is never a nonparticipant in what God does. God does not

separate God's self from the community by ranks of angel-secretaries through whom we have to arrange an audience.”

- † Okay, so that's how God works, but what if YOU still can't dance? Yes, our Trinitarian God does dance perfectly, but often we don't. And sometimes we won't even leave our seats at the edge of the dance floor. Why? Perhaps someone made fun of us (like they did of Elaine on “Seinfeld). Maybe we stepped on our partner's toes. And maybe we even fell flat on our face, like a drunken cowboy did with me at the Lincoln rodeo 30 years ago.
- † That's why we need God as our partner. Because remember that dancing is a metaphor for loving, really. Heaven knows we don't love perfectly, as God loves. Yes, that's why we need to be connected to God, to love God, so we can learn to love each other and God's creation better—especially when life trips us up.
- † You know that Tom and I returned a week ago from visiting our Chicago family. It consists of my mother who has Alzheimer's and lives in an assisted living facility, my father and his wife, my sister and her partner who have 1-year old twins, our sixteen-year-old niece who is an orphan, and my sister's partner's parents. At several points, there were nine of us sharing two bathrooms and an urban bungalow's worth of space.
- † We remember occasional moments of wonderful grace: when Tom was playing the piano (songs from the Sound of Music) and my sister and I were singing (which we never do) and dancing with the babies; when my mother beamed with delight and laid her head on Tom's shoulder and said “This is the best day of my life” as she gazed across the lunch table at me (before Alzheimer's, she had “issues” with both of us).
- † But there were times of painful conflict, too. I won't tell you the details of those. But they were times when we felt relegated to the edges of

relationships. Only by praying to the God of relationship and love, the Holy Trinity, could we move through those conflicts and release instead of cling to the offenses, perceived or real.

† This week has been filled with poignant reminders of the challenge of loving, of living, of relationship. And it's a week like any other week. This is a special weekend of remembering, though—Memorial Day weekend. We remember the loves we've shared, and we are reminded of the pain of love when loss accompanies it.

† Today's scripture from Romans speaks of Paul's promise that "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope." Well, we'd rather not have quite so much of all that suffering, thank-you very much. As a pastor, I have seen Paul's promise lived out, and I have seen suffering break people and lives.

† I do know from experience that hope comes strongest in those who do not suffer in isolation. We are created through and for love, for life together. Joys are sweeter when shared; pain shared too will more likely make our broken places strong.

Leslie Weatherhead told about a difficult pastoral call he once made to a grieving

family: In one corner an old white-haired woman sitting in a low chair,

her face half hidden by her hand.... Her other hand is on the

shoulder of a younger woman, little more than a girl, who is

sitting at her feet. There is a fire in the grate.... The

younger had only been married three months, and then death

stalked her ... husband through pneumonia, and brought him down at

last. It was the day after the funeral. Suddenly the younger woman

turns almost ferociously on me.... "Where is God?" she demands.

"I've prayed to Him.... Where is He? ... You preached once on the

'Everlasting Arms.' Where are they?" ... I drew my fingertips

lightly down the older woman's arm. "They are here," I said. "They

are round you even now. These are the arms of God."

† It may not seem as if this whole business of the Trinity has any meaning for your life, but it does. When you love, even imperfectly, the Triune God dances with you.

† Today we had the privilege of baptizing little Jayden Donahue. Each of the Donahue children was welcomed into their family with great intentionality—from the ends of the earth and from the extreme challenges of family relationships. Soon the Donahues will be leaving our church family for Colorado, and we will grieve their loss.

† But we will always remember that they belong to God and to us, even though the distance between us is great. For my part, I will never forget Ben's baptism not too long ago (along with Kaity's and Andrew's). As the

water washed down Ben's face, there was a special light that shone through him.

† Did you notice that we evoke the Holy Trinity when we welcome someone through baptism? Notice the statement of our faith that appears in the service order. Let's add to it by considering this ancient and beautiful Celtic prayer from the Carmina Gadelica:

† The little drop of the Father
On thy little forehead, beloved one.

† The little drop of the Son
On thy little forehead, beloved one.

† The little drop of the Spirit
On thy little forehead, beloved one.

† To aid thee from the fays,
To guard thee from the host;

† To aid thee from the gnome,
To shield thee from the spectre;

† To keep thee for the Three,
To shield thee, to surround thee;

† To save thee for the Three,
To fill thee with the graces;

† The little drop of the Three
To lave thee with the graces.

The Celtic tradition is full of wonderful examples of how ordinary images from Creation evoke the Holy Trinity.

† The dance of the grace of God, three in one, and one in three, is for each of us, beginning with our baptisms. So you think you can't dance? Well think again.

† And remember the words to a song not from one of the hot dance TV shows, but from a mellower time. Hear it with new ears:

I could have danced all night,

I could have danced all night,

And still have begged for more.

I could have spread my wings,

And done a thousand things,

I've never done before.

I'll never know what made it so exciting,

Why all at once my heart took flight,

I only know when [God] began to dance with me

I could have danced, danced, danced—all night. Amen.

Sources:

Jan Richardson, <http://paintedprayerbook.com>

Michael Lindvall, "God's Arms," Christian Century, June 1, 2004.

Alyce M. McKenzie, “A Trinity Shaped Life,” <http://www.patheos.com>

Eugene Peterson, Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places, 2005.