

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
II SAMUEL 6:1-5, 12b-19
PSALM 24
EPHESIANS 1:3-14
MARK 6:14-29
July 14, 2024

Let's Dance!

As I read the lections in preparation for preaching another sermon, two of the texts emphasizing dancing as a major storyline, I could not help but think of the numerous, the seemingly unlimited number of pop songs through the years that have the word “dance” in the lyrics. Ah, delightful memories of Disco dancing like sugar plums in our heads! You may have already noticed that the sermon title for our homiletical offering today is a tribute to the late David Bowie, highlighting his April 1983 album and accompanying hit song, “Let’s Dance!” Who knows, if you pay close attention, you might just hear some other dance-themed songs and/or lyrics sprinkled throughout the sermon. So, this morning I invite you to listen to the beat of a not-so-distant drum and imagine putting “on your red shoes” and dancing “the blues” as Bowie once urged his listening audience to do in his catchy lyrics. In our Witness from the Hebrew Bible in II Samuel and in our Witness from the Gospels in Mark we are privy to some dangerous dancing, some divine dancing, some dirty dancing, and some deadly dancing! Now you must remember that as a child I was exposed to some rather conservative stuff back in the day, a whole list of no-nos, sins, that were absolutely forbidden, dancing being among them, perhaps making the top of the list. You may know the old Baptist joke about dancing, “why are certain physical activities forbidden standing up? Answer, they might lead to dancing! One of my seminary professors used to joke about our obsession on sin, rhyming, “We don’t smoke, and we don’t chew, and we don’t go with girls who do!” So, with all that serving as introduction will you please give me the honor and “dance with me” this morning? Let’s continue our weekly conversation dance together as pastor and congregation against the backdrop, invoking a most wonderful and a most horrific text, dancing being the centerpiece providing the plotline for both narratives I have chosen to be read today? Perhaps we will all catch a little “dance fever” this morning and discover how dancing surely should describe our corporate life together, integral to our identity, our unique ethos, as beloved faith community! After all, every time we engage this liturgical exercise, in some way when we worship, we are truly joining the Holy in a divine dance, or at least should be, yes, dancing a dance with God and with one another! **Let’s dance together this morning, even as David once upon a time joyfully, uninhibitedly, danced before God! Yes, we “should be dancing!”**

As we begin to retell the fascinating biblical story from II Samuel today, you may have noticed that the magical, mystical editors of the Revised Common Lectionary, chose to leave out the middle section of this reading, skipping from verse five to verse twelve, not a good decision in my humble estimation because this paragraph is essential to exploring a significant thrust in this pivotal story from the Hebrew Bible. After all, why else would the ancient writers, editors, and compilers have put it there? As we pick up our storyline, we read that it was time, perhaps way past time, to move the sacred box, the portable house of God, the ark of the covenant, to Jerusalem, the city of David, Zion, a former Canaanite enclave known as Jebus before it was seized and conquered by the Israelites. Tabernacle is a Hebrew verb that means to be on the move, a word reflecting the early nomadic life of Hebrew culture before the Israelites settled the land of much promise as an agrarian people. This festive march back in the day reminds me of the amazing festivities we recently witnessed in town on the fourth of July. Yes, a magnificent parade was planned on that fateful day, a special day chosen for the removal of the ark from Baalah, known as Kiriath-jearim of Judah, with the intent of making its highly anticipated and no doubt much acclaimed arrival in Jerusalem. David had gathered all the chosen men of Israel, the biblical writer telling us that thirty thousand were assembled in Baale Judah to bring the “Lord of hosts enthroned on the cherubim” to its final, its proper and rightful resting place. A new cart was carefully constructed for the big celebration as they prepared for the journey, the removal of the ark beginning at the house of Abinadab. “David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the Lord with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.” And all went well, and everyone lived happily ever after! Well, not quite and this is where the preacher finds a sermon! Yes, all was going great, exactly according to plan, just swimmingly, moving merrily along, until!

Entrusted with overseeing the delivery of the sacred ark, the entourage traveled toward their final destination. Two men, Uzzah and Ahio, were driving the cart. Now, evidently, touching the sacred box was a bigtime no-no. In the immortal words of M. C. Hammer, “Can’t touch this!” As the caravan approached the threshing floor at a place called Nacon, one of the oxen bolted or stumbled and shook the sacred container that supposedly housed the Holy One. Instinctively and proactively, in what was indeed an instinctual, in a natural, kneejerk reaction, Uzzah reached out his hand to steady the ark, making sure the rectangular box did not tip over and crash to the ground with a thunderous thud. Imagine the horror of spilling the divine contents, its precious cargo tossed all over the ground, damaging the sacred goods, in what would have been a most embarrassing moment. The text tells us that Uzzah “took hold of it!” Big mistake, for the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah and God struck him, smote him on the spot, DRT, dead right there. Well, that kind of put a damper on the festivities! Spoiled all the fun! David became angry because the Lord reacted in such a reactively angry and spiteful manner, fear seizing the relatively new king

of Israel. David cried out in a fit of agony, the king of Israel no longer wanting any part of the sacred vessel, "How can the ark of the Lord come into my care?" Don't get that dangerous thing near me! What a king! So, David whimpered out and refused to hospitably receive in his care and trust the sacred object, unwilling to bring the ark to the city of Jerusalem. Instead, David quickly changed course and had the ark delivered to the house of Obededom the Gittite where it would reside for the next three months. Obededom suddenly became the surprise recipient of all sorts of a host of unexpected blessings because of his willingness to serve as host of the Holy. Well, upon hearing these fascinating rumors regarding those unidentified, but no doubt magnificent, gifts, an envious David became most displeased, knowing he was missing out on a whole boatload of divine goodies. And so, David quickly gathered his minions in what seemed like an impromptu reaction, and went and retrieved said sacred box, finally delivering the divine goods to Jerusalem, where the ark, this precious package holding the sacred stuff would eventually become the centerpiece of the temple, a magnificent edifice that would be named in honor of David's number one progeny, Solomon. Once again, as they brought the ark on its second adventurous journey, David danced before the Lord, this time wearing nothing more than a linen ephod, a see-through, vividly transparent, frock allowing everyone to see the king in his birthday suit, up close and personal. Perhaps the funniest line in the story is the way that the writer of II Samuel describes the reaction of Michal, the daughter of Saul and wife of David. Horribly offended at the spectacle, Michal revealed her disdain for the man who replaced her father, the apple of God's eye, the Bible declaring the second king of Israel as a "man after God's own heart." As she looked out the window at the coming spectacle, watching her unbridled husband leaping and dancing before the ark of God, the text reveals that Michal despised David in her heart, losing all respect for her hubby and God's anointed liege. Well, evidently David kept dancing and eventually the ark of God was brought to its final resting place, becoming the centerpiece of worship and cultic religious activity. Great story every time we read it again!

This morning I wish to further consider the part of the story left out of the Hebrew Bible reading in II Samuel for today, a narrative in which Uzzah makes a major miscalculation and intervenes to steady the wobbling ark, paying the ultimate price with his life for his dimwitted decision, foolishly but strangely sensibly putting his very life on the line. The world is full of people like Uzzah, always anxious, driven by fear, haunted by rigidly rote rituals, routines inflexibly engrained, halting and hesitant, catatonically cautious, immobilized, nervous, timid, scared, prone to over functioning in every way imaginable, always needing to be in control, always hoping to manipulate whatever processes are placed before them. These kinds of folks are more comfortable as spectators, choosing to observe life and reality from the sidelines, life passing them by as they merrily roll along. Grabbing life by the horns, or whatever, is not their forte! Frankly, these types cannot even be described as followers because they do not trust, people or processes. Frankly, Uzzah and his ilk are boring, the kinds of people who are a drag on every human dynamic, stunting whatever

creativity might be possibly manifesting in any a given moment. Uzzah and his kind tend to always color inside the lines, paint with the smallest of brush strokes, think inside their narrow boxes, never pushing the boundaries, never rocking the boat, never challenging status quo, never questioning authority, never going against the tide, always obedient, ever bowing to tradition, steadfastly holding to the way things have always been and always been done, “Nervous Nellies” whose insecurity drives the pedestrian ebb and flow that keeps them comfortably and safely in line. Life is always lived in the fairway, never in the rough, never in the challenging sand traps! Uzzah, and people of his sort simply cannot dance, do not know how to dance, do not want to dance, do not want to learn any new moves. The worst dance step in the world is, “We have never done it that way before!” Dancing is forbidden because dancing, unless it is carefully choreographed, every move planned beyond meticulous degree, very, very, scripted. **Dancing demands being freed from the shackles of inhibitions, requiring the participant to freelance, to engage in freedom of expression and movement. Dancing casts all cares and conventions to the wind, at least suspending time long enough to breath the fresh air that creative movement can spawn, yes, that stirs the human spark of the Divine inherently imbued within each one of us.**

For many, if not most of us, during our formative years, dancing as a metaphor for independent thought, for intellectual curiosity, critical thinking, and definitely for thinking theologically, yes, encouraging a modicum of creatively imaginative thinking, was discouraged if not forbidden altogether. We were taught to be pious robots, yes, piously robotical, lockstep lemmings who drank the Kool Aid of our leadership, mirroring the propaganda espoused by Church teaching, mimicking the Tradition of the Church handed down for centuries by our well-meaning forebears in the faith, the patriarchal Church Fathers who in their delusional protective role thought they knew best. We embraced the dogma, swore allegiance to doctrinal mandates, fundamentals they all are now called, and in many churches and denominations, routinely recited the ancient creeds, even from memory, valuable words but frozen in time and read as if they were written for all time, as if they were freshly minted compositions, still relevant, still speaking. Yes, some parts still are! Anyone who dared speak an alternative, a dissident word, daring to disagree or question, was reigned in immediately, rebukingly corrected, and perhaps even ridiculed, the risk of a counter narrative too great, too much to allow, too much to take. And so, parishioners either sat back and absorbed the blow, going politely with the flow, quit steeple life altogether, joining what the late John Shelby Spong called “members of the Church’s alumni association,” or, in a few cases, sought another pathway landing on the distant shores of the minority of churches that embrace, cherish, celebrate diversity in all its myriad and magical forms, hospitably welcoming and including each beautiful human creation crafted in the very image of God, reflecting every distinct, unique, persuasion. As we have all wonderfully discovered, celebrating diversity is an amazingly wonderful art form all its own!

I am almost certain that all of us have heard the old adage about the danger of making assumptions. That being said, I am going to go out on a limb this morning and make some, assuming that most, if not all, of us are here, at this congregation, have chosen this local missional church, this beloved faith community, because we know that we will all be allowed, no, encouraged, urged, to dance, to be heard, to find our voice, to follow our head and heart, to dance to a different tune, the different drumbeats we hear, to find and feed our passions, to join in holy relationship, creating a family of faith that is strong on goals and objectives and short on dysfunction as a family system, building beloved faith community one precious person created in the image of God at a time. **My hunch, as we celebrate newcomers on this special day, new members coming into our midst who are proudly joining the First Congregational United Church of Christ, individuals who will challenge and change us, enhance who and what we are in yet untold ways, our congregation becomes richer, like a delicious, scrumptious, soup filled with the finest of multiple ingredients. Each one of us, all of us, bring a new ingredient, a unique and savory flavor to this sacred setting, nurturing, emboldening and empowering, this sacred steeple to be the best collection of Jesus followers that it can be,** reminding the local Eagle River community and communities beyond that we represent a Christianity now sadly deemed alternative, different, radical, representing a segment of Christendom that is not at all freakish, i.e., heretical, but is wholly loving, graciously welcoming and inclusive, thoughtfully theological, contemporarily liturgical, and homiletically, that is sermonically, engagingly challenging. Our prayer and our hope are that we can model in our preaching and teaching, and in our actions, that we echo, emulate as much as is humanly possible, the mission and ministry of Jesus, this historical man from Nazareth, the carpenter of humblest beginnings, the teacher who is our rabbi, yes, mentor, brother and friend, our perfect model for faithful living.

As we welcome these newbies this day, it is also our hope and our prayer that these new kids on the block will bring new ideas and fresh energy, that indeed, they will push us as they teach us some new dance steps, that as we dance together as a congregation, we will expand a wonderfully choreographed vision of our emerging and evolving identity, of who and what we are and who and what we have the glorious potential to become, all we want to be. With every new parishioner we become better, getting closer to becoming all we can be, fulfilling our unlimited potential, evermore embodying the vibrant and vital, relational and relevant, beloved faith community that God is calling us, and every church, to be. So, on this high and holy festival day, a celebration in every way imaginable, let us join in the dance. No folks, we are not “dancing in the dark,” but are joyfully dancing in the light with the dawn of each new day, the horizon unfolding our future bright and shining like the sun. As Dan Fogelberg once sang in his hit song about Kentucky horse racing, “It’s high time we join in the dance” because the last dance is nowhere on our radar. Yes, we ought to be dancing every day! We have every reason to dance! So, put on your dancing shoes, your boogie shoes, and dance with me, won’t you! Let’s dance a dance that is ours, unique to our

way of being and doing, contagious in every way, intoxicating at every level, an ecclesial dance that makes a statement, a witness, yes, a testimony, about what it means to reflect and reveal the love of Jesus in the world to everyone, yes, “no matter who they are or where they are on life’s journey,” a dance that is the proof of the pudding that God is still speaking and is still speaking here and now in this sacred space. May our dancing show the world, or at least our little corner of it, that there is something brewing right here and right now in this holiest of places, among this most hospitably welcoming and inclusive people, all of this local missional church immersed in joy, a congregation that exudes the loving grace, the peace and mercy, manifesting for all to see the abundant generosity that overflows from our thankful lives, grateful for the journey, every adventure this life has to offer, illuminating a faithfulness that we long to share with any seekers who are looking, who are searching for meaning, something transcendent beyond themselves, manifesting a holy presence full of awe and wonder, yes, a God who dances and invites us to dance as well!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and invites us to join in the dance, the dance of life, the dance of faith! Amen and amen!