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Dancing for God

Ephesians 1:3-13; 2 Samuel 6:1-16

Celebrating the 500<sup>th</sup> Birthday of John Calvin

It must have been quite a sight, that ecstatic dance around the ark. We are told that David danced and leaped with all his might to the sounds of tambourines and castanets and cymbals. But, Michal did not approve. Not at all. Daughter of the former king. Wife to David, though not by her choice, she probably had more than a few reasons for her reproach.

When David returned to his house, Michal was waiting for him. “How the king of Israel honored himself today,” she said, her voice imperious and dripping with sarcasm, “He shamelessly uncovered himself before the eyes of his servants’ maids, as any vulgar fellow might do.”

David might have been a hero to Israel, a leader of armies, the uniter of a young nation, the newly anointed king, but to her he was an embarrassment, shameful and vulgar, his dance an insult to the nation and to God.

I’ve got to tell you that this encounter between the king and his nagging wife worries me more than a little. Not because of the problems it portends for their

marriage. Not because it is so indicative of the ongoing tension between the house of Saul, now fallen, and the house of David which has risen in its place.

The reason this spat unsettles me is that I find myself instinctively wanting to side with Michal. I think she has a good point. Wild dancing, mostly naked, into the city of Jerusalem does not seem fitting for a king.

Perhaps you've been to a concert or a music festival where a band is playing. The crowd is feeling good, swaying to a gentle beat. But up near the front, quite close to the speakers, there are a couple of people dancing hard, exaggerated in their movements. They don't care what the crowd thinks. They've just been swept away by the music. In my worst judgmental thoughts, I can't help but wonder to myself—who are those people? Do they hold onto day jobs? Have they taken some recreational drugs?

Not very charitable thoughts, I know. After all, these are people out having a good time not hurting a soul. And yet, I think there is something about people who are too 'into' something that is a bit off-putting to most of us.

Modest in dress. Moderate in speech and action. These are things we value, isn't it so? Regulated. Within Bounds. Measured and contained.

In Classical ethics, achieving the mean is the aim of virtue, reaching that mid-point between opposite and undesirable extremes. One example might be the virtue of courage. It lies at the middle of a continuum which stretches from

cowardice to foolishness. Fearful, a coward senses danger and runs from it. Lacking fear, a fool fails to sense danger and runs toward it without conviction or purpose. A brave person understands the danger and fears it, but faces it nevertheless out of conviction and purpose. Courage then falls at the median point. It is the one towards which we should strive.

John Calvin, as a student of the classics, was well-versed in the virtue of moderation, and he made it an important part of his thought. In fact, Calvin was quite suspicious of spontaneity and impulsiveness. That shouldn't surprise anyone, for we Presbyterians have always taken to heart the Apostle Paul's admonition to do things "decently and in good order."

According to Calvin, even what seem like benign impulses must be held in check. "Wherever the Lord calls us," Calvin urged, "we must energetically run; but anyone who goes too far will at length experience the unhappy result of exceeding his limits." Zeal and enthusiasm, even for the Lord, come with restrictions.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, in their own day, the reformers themselves were accused of being immoderate. The genius of both Luther and Calvin was discovering, or rediscovering, that God's grace is freely given, never earned. That insight can easily lead to lawlessness. "God has blessed me. I can do anything, now, regardless of the consequences!"

Some years ago, I counseled with a couple that was having quite a few problems. The husband was drinking a lot, and chasing other women. He was quite unrepentant about his behavior, and he tried out a theological argument on me. “I’ve been saved,” he said, “so I know my sins are forgiven.”

That is not the way it works. Certainly not for Calvin. When we are most aware of who we are, and who God is, we can only live in faithfulness and obedience. For Calvin, the Law plays an important role, not to save us, but to instruct us how to live fully, at peace with God, our neighbors, and ourselves. It is in obedience, living within certain limits, that we are most free.

These issues are crucial for the life of faith. What are our limits? What ought we strive for? Do we restrain ourselves, or let ourselves go?

The dance of David was a letting go. Not in an evil way. Let me make clear that I harbor no latent Puritan ideas that dancing is somehow wrong. I grew up in a city that loves to dance. My parents who are here today can attest to that. From the Cajun two step, to the second liners following their favorite marching band to ballroom moves on the dance floor of high society Carnival ball, New Orleans never stops dancing, and we participated in it all.

In something of an apology for David’s behavior, John Calvin wrote that David was conforming to the customs of his time. “We must all by nature make

merry; there is no one who is not given to it.”<sup>2</sup> I am relieved that Calvin could say that.

But, David was doing more than making merry. He was not simply having fun on the dance floor. He was giving himself over to God in ritual and action, worship and movement. For someone on the outside, that may seem like disorder, but for David it was really a re-ordering. It was not a loss of control; but giving himself over to God’s control.

This is where I think we Presbyterians, we children of John Calvin, face some spiritual peril. In our desire for order, we can avoid the re-ordering that the Spirit brings. We settle for comfortable patterns which we claim are pleasing to God, but they are really just what’s easiest for us.

And when it comes right down to it, that’s why Michal’s critique of David appeals to me. Because if Michal was right, maybe I shouldn’t put too much energy into my faith. If Michal was right, then I can just go along with what everyone else expects of me, and not try to figure out what is the faithful path for me.

When we consider all of the true heroes of the faith, there is a long list of characters who seem more than a bit immoderate.

From the early church there is the story of Telemachus, a monk of the fourth century, who lived in solitude. In his prayers, he kept having this very strong sense

that God wanted him to go to Rome. Why go there? To the big city, when he lived a modest and pleasing life of retreat? But, Telemachus followed that calling and ended up in the city on the day of a great gladiatorial contest.

Telemachus followed the crowds into the vast Coliseum. He reasoned to himself, “this must be why God has brought me to Rome,” and he took his seat along with 100,000 or more other spectators all cheering, “Hail to Caesar. We die to the glory of Caesar!”

Appalled by this spectacle of killing for sport, Telemachus dashed down the steps, climbed over the wall and RAN to the center of the arena. He stood between two fully armed gladiators who were about to start their match. He cried out, “In the name of Christ, Stop!”

The crowd saw this strange little man out in the middle of the place of combat, and they began to laugh and jeer. When one of the gladiators pushed him to the ground, they laughed even harder. When Telemachus got back to his feet, he brushed the dust from his tunic and began again to plead. “In the name of Christ, Stop!” This time, the crowd did not laugh. Heated words gave way to rocks, hurled with deadly force. Telemachus was stoned to death by an angry crowd.

What a strange man. And immodest, too, thinking he could interrupt the sport of so many. But he was dancing, dancing before God. No one remembers the names of any in the crowd that day, or the gladiators who were so rudely

interrupted, or even who the emperor was at the time. But we can still tell the story of Telemachus, and his audacious faith.

In the Modern church, we have heroes, too. Bishop Desmond Tutu. He was a pastor to a largely white congregation, but he spoke to the longings of blacks, and sought to appeal to the best instincts of white Christians in South Africa and throughout the world. He said of apartheid, “In the name of Christ, stop!” A lot of people thought he was crazy, but he was dancing for God. Even now, it’s hard to remember the names of those who mocked him and fought against Tutu, but Tutu will not be forgotten.

In the days of the Reformation, the church produced heroes as well. Among them, John Calvin. Not a perfect man, but a committed one who marched to a completely different beat. He was called many things; a lot of them cannot be repeated in church, because he stood against the hierarchy of his day, and he stood for the righteousness of Christ. And we still remember the stand he made, his unique dance for God.

David danced for God, too. That made those around him wonder if he had crossed a line which separates reverence from a lack of respect, enthusiasm and a loss of control, dignity from rudeness, even sanity from just plain craziness. It makes me wonder what others think about me, about my own worship, my own service of God. If no one has ever accused me of being crazy, of going too far out

on the limb, then maybe I haven't been dancing for God. I have been moving to my own beat, and not to God's.

Let us pray:

O Lord in your grace, lead us forward. Give us courage to respond in faith to your mighty call that we too might dance before you with all the saints. In Christ's name, Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>William J. Bousma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.