



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

DANCING WITH GOD ***By Dr. John Seibyl*** ***Seventh Sunday After Pentecost***

MEDITATION: O Father, let my meditations and words be a reflection of your Light, illuminating the pathways before us. Pray we may traverse these paths dancing your dance, delighting in your Will as your Chosen people. Amen

A. Some months ago, while walking along a street in New Orleans I heard music coming from about a block away. This is not unusual, but what was strange was that rather than the jazzy, bright, ambitiously energized sounds normally heard in the French Quarter, this music was rather slow, a dirge, like the lowing of a cow seeking her lost calf. I realized that I was watching a funeral procession. I saw the line of mourners file by me in the funeral parade, tiny and precise beads of sweat glistening on their faces in the humid, brilliant summer morning.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, the dirge changed into a bright, upbeat, and energetic sound. The mourners, taking their cue from this, were instantly transformed from their slow and deliberate funereal march into a frenetic dancing celebration, awakened in unison like a rousing dragon. Handkerchiefs, which moments ago were used to wipe tears of sadness and loss, became small white flags waved in jubilant celebration.

At first, I thought this a most extraordinary, odd, if not schizoid display. On further consideration, I realized this actually makes a point on a number of levels; emotional, psychological, and theological. These mourners are a faith community who wear their beliefs on their sleeves, publicly and unabashedly joyous in the certainty of one thing: that as much as they miss and grieve for their departed brother or sister, they are exuberant in the understanding that their friend is going home.... to God. They teach us a lesson; that as members of a community in genuine relationship with God, there is always a place in our burdened hearts for glimmers of light and weightlessness and joy, even ecstatic dance.

B. Backtrack now 3,000 years to another dance by another faith community, this time in ancient Israel where King David led a celebratory parade with some thirty thousand men “dancing mightily” accompanied by harps, lyres, cymbals, and tambourines. The reason for this raucous celebration is the Ark of the Covenant, a precious object to the Jews and the material symbol of God’s promise and presence in the community. The Ark, containing two stone tablets bearing the inscription of the Ten Commandments, was being brought to an honored place in Jerusalem having accompanied the Israelites in their years of wandering in the desert.

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The Ark is important because it represents God's connection to the Jewish community, the covenant made with Abraham, reinforced by Moses and symbolized by the Ten Commandments. To this faith community connection with God is in a covenant defined by laws and commandments, articulated through prophets and interpreted and codified for the people by priests. God's marvelous choreography, his plan for his Chosen, worth dancing mightily over.

C. Fast forward now 1000 years to St. Paul writing to a mostly Gentile faith community in the young church in Ephesus. Paul's letter was an effort to address a major controversy, specifically, how is it that Gentiles can receive benefit of salvation by the Messiah promised to the Jews, or rephrased, can one be a Christian without being a Jew? More important, it speaks to the evolution of the relationship between God and his Chosen peoples. Taking from St. Paul's letter: "In Christ we have obtained an inheritance toward redemption as God's own people...". God reaches out to us through his Son, Jesus, who becomes incarnate, one of us, and serves as our bridge to heaven, as intermediary and mentor. He delivers the Father's invitation to the great dance as His chosen people.

D. Frankly, this is an astounding and remarkable notion; that we as a community of faith are rehabilitated through grace to be true children of God. Despite our flaws, our pettiness, our undeserving, self-centered, and repeatedly sinful lives, despite all this, God sees something in us. His startling overture may be due to the simple idea that we are created with love in His image; as my Sunday school student once told me, "God don't make junk".

As God's children, we inherit the possibility of redemption, bounty in this life and in the one beyond, beyond the sting of suffering and disappointment, beyond the constraints of our physical bodies, beyond the fear of death and the tomb, beyond our incomplete understanding, to a moment when, Paul writes, "we will see everything with perfect clarity, all that we know now is partial and incomplete, but then we will know everything completely". We inherit the possibility of going home.

Yet, accepting God's invitation to engagement as his people in His great dance, is not without risk and consequence; even as we giddily celebrate, we must soberly assess the meaning of accepting claim to our inheritance. This is not about defeating our enemies in battle. Nor is it about obtaining great wealth, influence, or popularity. It is about embracing difficult positions and stances, acting counter to our own seeming interests at times, turning the other cheek and having it struck, being put out, mocked and ridiculed. Paul knew this risk quite well, he wrote to the Ephesians from a Roman prison. John the Baptist provides even more dramatic demonstration of the risk and the difficult interface between the secular world and persons of faith. Mark's gospel describes yet another dance, one very different and in dramatic contrast to the Israelites' joyous celebration of the Ark in Jerusalem or that of our friends celebrating the passing of their brethren in New Orleans. The dance of Herod's step-daughter Salome is seductive, manipulative, and full of retribution, subterfuge, and hate. It is a dance of whirling, swirling, salacious evil, out of step with God, commissioned by Herod's drunken oath, costing John the Baptist his head, ... a dance of death.

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E. Some two thousand years after John the Baptist, how do we understand God's mystical choreography in our lives, in our faith community? Are we in step as members of God's family, created in His image and a reflection of Him to others? How do you manifest your spark of the Divine in the world at large? Is faith a private thing reserved for Sunday mornings or does it spill out of you for all the world to see, like the effusive mourners in New Orleans?

As for my own dance with God and Faith, sometimes the irony can be overwhelming, you see I have Parkinson's, a movement disorder I have studied all my professional life, developing brain imaging techniques for diagnosis and monitoring treatment responses. My first thought about this diagnosis was that this is not possible; it must all be in my head. After all, I am the diagnostician, not the diagnose (denial). I realized of course, one way or another, it is definitely in my head (acceptance). Who can be so lucky as to be able to get up each morning and go to work on unlocking the secrets of the disease that one is afflicted with? Now I simply feel that God has a pointed sense of humor..... as do I (integration). My own dance with the Divine (again an odd metaphor for someone with a movement disorder) has taught me that I am never alone, that curses can become blessings, and obstacles become opportunities.

Another take on Faith and God among us is from the writer and artist K. Gibram:
Is not Faith "... all deeds and all reflection? ...

Who can separate his faith from his actions, or his belief from his occupations?

Who can spread his hours before him, saying, "This for God and this for myself;

This for my soul, and this other for my body?.....

Your daily life is your temple and your religion.

Whenever you enter into it, take with you your all.

And if you would know God be not therefore a solver of riddles.

Rather look about you and you shall see Him playing with your children.

And look into space; you shall see Him walking in the cloud, outstretching His arms in the lightning and descending in rain.

You shall see Him smiling in flowers, then rising and waving His hands in trees."

Finally, you shall see Him, in the faces of others, companions on this earthly journey, in this community at Trinity, in the Christians dancing through their grief on the streets of New Orleans, in all of us, miraculously, part of God's great plan, His choreography of restoration and salvation meted out through the generations. We are co-inheritors of God's unfathomable grace, privileged beyond our frail understanding to be invited to our own dance with the Divine and to address our reply to His invitation using these two familiar and precious words.... "Our Father".

Post-meditation:

".... And when the earth shall claim your limbs, then shall you truly dance." K. Gibram

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