

Proper 10B; July 12, 2009
2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Ps 26
Eph 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

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On the feast of Simchat Torah, when our Jewish neighbors finish reading the annual cycle of Torah and begin again at Genesis 1, they dance. Old men and young, they pick up the Torah scrolls and cradle them in their arms like children and dance them around the streets, treading out their joy in their God, their community, and the way of life to which God has called them. It is a beautiful thing: soul and body uniting in unselfconscious praise of God.

The tradition is alive and well at the Episcopal Church of St. Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco. Each year, during the Great Vigil of Easter, the whole congregation form themselves into concentric circles and dance around the altar, beating drums and singing, rejoicing that we live in the light of the risen Christ, who has vanquished death, conquered fear, and destroyed the lasting power of evil.¹ Unlike most so-called “liturgical dance,” which features a few people in spandex performing for the congregation, these dances are liturgy in the truest sense; the dance is the work of the people (that’s what “liturgy” means: the work of the people), the whole people, who are yielding up their bodies and their hearts to the service of their God.

But I have to admit, my current image for David and the Israelites dancing before the Ark comes from a wedding I attended last spring in India. As the dusk fell and the guests milled around in confusion, suddenly there was the sound of a driving drumbeat, and through the darkness came the groom, riding in an ox-cart, with his whole extended family dancing before him on the road. It went on and on for about twenty minutes -- the pulsing drum, the dancing figures glinting in the torchlight, the shoulders and feet of the guests beginning to move and sway, a wild jubilation that new life was going to come to these families from these two young people. Reading today’s passage from Second Samuel, I could almost see the young David tucked in among the crowd, hair flying, sweat running down his face, all his royal dignity, for a moment, forgotten.

And dignity seems to be at the heart of today’s passage, for David makes a clear choice. He can honor himself, following the ark with all the pomp and circumstance due to a king, or he can honor his God, get over himself -- for a few minutes, and allow himself to be transported by delight and reverence and awe. David knew, in his heart, that it would not abase him to show honor where honor was due, but only to deny honor to one as great as God, and so he stripped down to his linen ephod and leapt and danced before his God. Now, we don’t talk much about ephods these days, but a linen ephod was something like a loincloth, or a pair of boxer shorts; it didn’t cover much, particularly if David was dancing. And so it is pretty clear that, while David was leaping around in a kind of ecstatic trance, he was also exposing himself to many of his subjects. And they didn’t mind -- except for one: Michal, the daughter of Saul, David’s wife. Michal, who had chosen David over her father, and tried to build peace between them. Michal, who thought she knew what was beneath the dignity of a king. And when she saw her husband leaping and dancing before the Lord, “she despised him in her heart” - and she had no child from that day until the day of her death. (2 Sam 6:16, 23)

So what is this “dignity” which we try to protect in ourselves? What is this “dignity” which we have sworn, in our Baptismal Covenant, to honor in every human being? Is it something external, something which has to do with deportment, pomp, and stodginess? Is it the enemy of play and of joy? Or is it something inherent, a quality of the spirit which others can take away only if we allow it? Is Michal right, in thinking that abasing ourselves before another -- even before God --

¹ If you wish to see the congregation dance, you can find video footage at the following link:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5wYkFAfPs4>.

lowers us irreparably? Or is there a dignity which comes from honoring other people, even honoring them before we honor ourselves?

Dignity is worth: it means that each one of us is inherently valuable and worthy. That worth has been given to us by God in creation; it has been restored in Christ's act of redemption; it has been affirmed at the time of our baptism. It cannot be taken away from us by others -- only by ourselves. If we violate the dignity of another human being, we violate our own. And yet, there are times when each of us questions our dignity, when we ask if we are worth anything at all.

Donna Hicks, of Harvard's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, talks about our struggle for dignity in terms of a model developed by William James.² James wrote that each one of us has an "I" and a "me" -- a self which is inherent, and a self which looks for reinforcement from outside ourselves. In Hicks' terms, the "I" is that part of ourselves which knows we are unconditionally worthy. It looks for connections with others, values intimacy, is trustful and open and forthright. It responds to suggestions gratefully, aware that they are an opportunity to grow. But the "me" constantly looks for approval from others. It is distrustful, because it feels itself to be incomplete, a sham, a fraud. It hears suggestions as criticism, lacks the grounding to take a courageous stand when others disagree.

Both figure in today's story. When David returns from bringing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, Michal meets him at the door and says, "How the king of Israel honored himself today before the eyes of his servants' maids, as any vulgar fellow might shamelessly uncover himself!" (2 Sam 6:20) Her reply is all "me": it looks to the opinions of others, contrasts David's behavior with that of the "vulgar," castigates him for being uncovered and vulnerable rather than self-protective and well-defended. But David replies out of his "I": "It was before the Lord, who chose me in place of your father and all his household, to appoint me as prince over Israel, the people of the Lord, that I have danced before the Lord. I will make myself yet more contemptible than this, and I will be abased in my own eyes; but by the maids of whom you have spoken, by them I shall be held in honor." (2 Sam 6:21-22) David reminds Michal that his dignity did not come from inherited wealth or power, which can be taken away, but from the God who guides the destinies of women and of men. To abase himself before God, to make himself small in his own eyes, is merely to recognize the true ordering of reality, and it is a mark of honor, not of shame.

What *is* a mark of shame is to dance before the wrong God. David is not our only dancer today; the lections also give us Salome, the daughter of Herodias, dancing before her stepfather the king.³ And her dance pleases the King and his lords so much that Herod promises to give her anything she asks for, even half of his kingdom. So running to her mother, the young girl asks what to ask for, and her mother tells her, "the head of John the baptizer." (Mark 6:24) And so the young girl returns to the banquet-hall, and the prophet dies. The scene is systematic in its exposure of a false concept of dignity. Herod is trying to impress, not his God, but his nobles. The girl is a pawn in the hands of a vengeful mother, who sacrifices her own daughter's well-being on the altar of her own grudge, asking, not for an estate, or for something useful, but for a murder. The king, who honors the prophet, is too afraid of being diminished in the eyes of his lords to reject the demand and guide the girl in a more appropriate direction. Together, they embody peer-pressure, vindictiveness, envy, malice, weakness, and fear -- every dynamic with which leads us to shame one another.

² Dr. Hicks' theory will be elaborated in a forthcoming book, provisionally titled *A Matter of Dignity*. I learned of her work when she taught at a session of the Clergy Leadership Project, and am grateful to this parish for giving me the opportunity to participate.

³ Actually, today's reading calls her merely "the daughter of Herodias." The first-century Roman Jewish historian Flavius Josephus gives her name as "Salome" in his book *Jewish Antiquities*.

The only barrier which prevents any one of us from behaving in this fashion is to be so deeply rooted and grounded in Christ that we do not need to bolster our dignity in false ways. If we live out of our “I,” we cannot be seduced by the false demands of the “me.” Instead, we gain all the freedom of Christ: freedom to follow God’s call for us; freedom to risk bold, creative action; freedom to give of ourselves to the least of our neighbors without worrying that we will be esteemed the less. But how do we uphold our own dignity so that we do not need to worry about others taking it away?

Dr. Hicks suggests that there are ten essential elements of dignity. (1) We need to accept all other people as our equals, neither greater nor lesser than ourselves. (2) We need to acknowledge the personhood of the others whom we meet, not treating them as mere instruments for achieving our own ends. (3) We need to include one another, and to resist the structures of exclusion, even when they exclude people we’d really rather not be around. (4) We need to guard one another’s physical and psychological safety, and (5) to treat other people in accordance with mutually-agreed-upon standards of fairness. (6) We need to honor one another’s agency, or freedom to make one’s own choices. (7) We need to give others the chance to explain themselves, listening to them in order to see the world through their eyes. (8) We need to respond to them, not ignoring their concerns. (9) We need to treat people as if they were trustworthy, and, (10) when we harm someone else, we need to take responsibility for the harm we have done, and take action to right the wrong.

St. Paul sums it all up in his letter to the Ephesians: God has blessed us. God has chosen us. God has adopted us. God has redeemed us, forgiven us, lavished us with grace. God has gifted us with wisdom and insight “so that we...might live for the praise of his glory.”⁴ If God is giving us all that, we do not need to worry about protecting our own turf. What is left for us but to rejoice?

Simply this: to honor and build up the dignity of the others God has blessed and chosen and redeemed. We here at Christ Church strive to be a welcoming community. We shape our common liturgy to include elements of worship which are important to our members from different places in the Anglican Communion. We hold festivals which honor one another’s heritages. We give our time and space to feed the hungry, house the homeless, strengthen those wrestling with addiction. We feed one another’s minds in class; listen to one another’s stories in small-group settings. In all these things, we seek to honor the dignity of every human being.

If there is one place we are struggling, or even failing, however, I think it is the way we speak of other Christians with whom we disagree. I do not mean Christians within our parish community; here, we seem to handle disagreement reasonably well. But I have become aware of a strong undercurrent of contempt for the members of the Christian Right, an undercurrent which I think undermines our own spiritual health, both as individuals and as a community. Too often, the very same people here who are so careful to demonstrate respect and sensitivity for the beliefs of our Jewish, Buddhist, and Muslim neighbors invoke our fellow Christians as straw-men, deride them with cutting remarks, and act out our discomfort with some of the things they believe or with the way they live their lives. In many ways, I share your discomfort. (They drive me nuts, too!) And yet, God has chosen these people to be our brothers and sisters in Christ. When we say things like *At least we’re not self-righteous like they are*, isn’t it possible we’re being a bit...self-righteous?

Living in the Bible Belt, I spent a lot of time immersed in that culture. I saw much that I found problematic, but also -- and I’m being very honest here -- much to admire. There were attitudes about the roles of women and of men, the authority of government, the use of force in foreign polity, the exclusion of gay and lesbian persons, the way we read Scripture, and a multitude of other issues which were problematic in terms of how I understand God and God’s work in the world. But there was also in ordinary people a deep faithfulness; most of the people around me were

⁴ Eph 1:3-12; quotation is from vs. 12.

men and women who were devoted to Christ, people who were trying to live their lives in the light of what they believed about God, just as I was. They taught their children carefully about God and about service to one another. They participated in Bible studies and served at soup kitchens and laughed and cried while we worked together to pull apart houses which had been damaged by Hurricane Katrina. And I had to respect their integrity, even as I hope they respected my own.

If I had to guess at the elements of the discomfort and contempt that I hear, there would be two. There are many social issues on which our interpretations of God's will are different from theirs. Their ways of reading Scripture do not tend to be our ways: our two communities handle text differently, revere different passages, hold different teachings to be paramount. But the way to resolve such differences is not to cut one another down, tempting though it may be when others are deriding us. It's to engage in respectful discussion, explaining our point of view to others, and, equally important, listening to theirs for what we need to hear and learn. We do this so well with those whom we know face-to-face; the challenge is to do it with the disembodied stranger whom we rarely encounter. We need to seek out the encounter, believing that Christ lives in them as he lives in us.

But the second discomfort I think I hear, rightly or wrongly, is that they dance before the Lord in different ways than we do. There is an emotionalism in certain forms of Evangelical worship which makes us a bit nervous, I think. We prefer reverence and calm and order in this sanctuary. And there is a real danger in mere emotionalism when it leads us to discount the teachings of the mind. It is an immature form of religion which seeks God only in spiritual "highs"; God was with Christ in Gethsemane as surely as God was with him at the Transfiguration. And yet, as human beings, we are made of head and of heart; we need both to be in a real relationship with God. In this respect, perhaps our more charismatic brothers and sisters show us our own shadow-side, point us to a path of fuller integration and greater wholeness. We would not want to be in a passionless marriage, yet too often we settle for a cerebral prayer-life. We are afraid of exposing ourselves, and so we are reluctant to dance.

This week and next, the Bishops and deputies of the Episcopal Church are meeting in Convention, wrestling with the angel who comes to them in the form of the neighbor with whom they disagree. Their challenge is ours: to hold onto their convictions firmly, to love one another fiercely, to honor even their most dogged opponent as someone who is trying to dance before his God. And dance is not a demolition derby.

God has called us to love those we do not understand. God has urged us to turn the other cheek even when we are being struck. God has showed us how to honor the dignity even of those who try to violate our own. These are not easy things, but they are the things which prevent us from engaging in the same kind of behavior we find so objectionable in others. We lose our dignity whenever we violate the dignity of others. But we preserve it whenever we remember that there is only one Lord, and only one Dance, but as many steps as there are dancers, and overlapping tunes we cannot even hear.

Dance, then, wherever you may be;
I am the Lord of the Dance, said he.
And I'll lead you all wherever you may be,
And I'll lead you all in the dance, said he.⁵

⁵ "Lord of the Dance," 19th c. Shaker tune; words by Sydney Carter, 1963.