Bailas?   A sermon preached for Southminster Presbyterian Church July 14, 2024

When I was a young schoolgirl, 4th and fifth grade,  I was dropped off and picked up at a church on Sunday mornings.  I loved going there. I believe it was a Disciples of Christ church, very close theologically to the UCC and Presbyterians.

I loved going there because the church lovingly embraced me, encouraged me, and affirmed by presence and participation in worship.  I was invited to sing with the adult choir and enjoyed that. But my favorite participation was being part of the children’s movement choir.

We wore little white robes, stood together, 5 or 6 of us, in the chancel, and moved in unison to a song sung by the choir. Our movements weren’t difficult or complicated, but somehow for me -there was a spiritual connection I experienced when moving with this little group as part of worship among the community. It was prayer in motion. And we children put our very best into our simple movements, with all the devotion and sincerity we could muster, much as we imagine David did so long ago.

Martha Graham, the great pioneer of modern dance in America, once said: “Dance is the hidden language of the soul.” Something to ponder as we consider today’s text.

At this moment in Israel, things are pretty good!  There’s a new King, acknowledged by the people as God’s choice to lead God’s chosen people.  It's a time of peace.

David, the new king,  has conquered Jerusalem and has made it as the new capital city of all Israel, renaming it “the City of David.” He’s built a splendid new palace.  He’s added wives and even more children.  And he has recently prevailed over Israel’s perennial enemies, the Philistines, not once but twice.

Now he just needs to get the ark of God into Jerusalem, so that Jerusalem becomes “not only the political but also the religious center of Israel.  That ark was the centerpiece of Israel’s religion, the most visible symbol of the presence of God among God’s people, the place where “the Lord Almighty… is enthroned between the cherubim that are on top of the ark. “ (1)

King David knew the old tradition about the ark.  He knew that he had to bring the ark into his city because then that city and his kingship “would visibly become the city and kingship of God.  As one scholar put it, “When David brings the ark to Jerusalem, he literally brings God into the center of his kingship.” (1)

Whatever we think of King David with all his weaknesses and imperfections, he is remembered as a man after God’s own heart.  When he celebrates with his people, dancing full out with all his heart and all his strength, having stripped off his kingly robes and wearing only the priestly ephod, a kind of undergarment. For David this is a humbling before God; this is a sincere dance of devotion and love of God.

To my way of thinking, picturing David is the exact opposite of that image four years ago we all saw of former president Trump standing in front of a church he rarely attended and waving a Bible.

Alan Levinovitz reacted this way to the event in his article:

“America opposes idolatry. Not just the act of idolatry but the very idea that idols have power. That is why its laws—unlike those of many other nations—do not criminalize the burning of holy books or the destruction of sacred images. Its citizens do not worship pictures of leaders. The power of words and images in the United States is in the values they represent, not the objects themselves. Even the perpetual attempts to criminalize flag-burning consistently—and rightly—fail.

Just as destroying these objects has no magic power, neither does holding them up. Only idolaters believe that waving a flag makes you a patriot or wearing a cross makes you a Christian. As the singer John Prine, put it: “Your flag decal won’t get you into heaven.”

But, back to dancing!

Research shows that for the first five centuries after Jesus, the church vigorously opposed any dancing in worship. For Tertullian, Augustine, and others - "[dance incited idolatry, lust and damnation](https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1201.htm)." (2)

Nevertheless, “despite centuries of dance prohibitions that came from church councils, ancient and medieval Christians would simply not stop dancing. 13th-century friar Francis of Assisi [was said to dance in a dramatic fashion while preaching](https://dmdhist.sitehost.iu.edu/francis.htm)."  (3)

Wouldn’t we have loved to see that?

Then the Protestant reformation came along and put the kabosh on dancing in church again. And while

the PBS documentary series “[The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song](https://www.pbs.org/show/black-church/),” and scholar [Henry Louis Gates Jr.](https://aaas.fas.harvard.edu/people/henry-louis-gates-jr) reminds us that African Americans introduced new rhythms, music and dance to Christianity from the days of slavery to the present, by the 1930’s ‘white” Christian worship in this country remained stuck in a more puritanical view of dance in worship. No dancing allowed. The very word “dance” was a red flag.

I first became aware of this “red flag” when I met Margaret Taylor Doan in the early 1980s in Fresno when she started attending the First Congregational church where I worked as Director of Christian Education.  I’d already begun a sacred and liturgical dance group, intergenerational in nature and active in worship with the support and encouragement of the resident pastor, Frank Baldwin.

One day Margaret came to meet me and to fill me in on her journey. Turns out she was one of four women, identified as great foremothers of sacred dance in the U.S. She’d begun her life work as the pastor’s wife in a UCC church in the east. Margaret worked with the children, preparing the little angels to do some simple movements in the Christmas play.

When word got out what she was up to, the ‘church fathers’ called her on the carpet!  She was the pastor’s wife but she was a little scared. At the end of their meeting, given Margaret’s passion and love of Jesus, not to mention her disarming personality - those church fathers could only say, “Oh, Margaret, you can do anything you want, just don’t call it dance!”

Margaret went on to practice the art of sacred and liturgical dance for the next sixty years, giving countless classes, workshops, TV shows, and writing no less than nine books on the subject, the very first in this country to do so.  She was a founding member of the national Sacred Dance Guild and served that group for decades.

My dear friend Margaret passed into her eternity at the age of 93, shortly after completing her last book, “Dancing 9 to 90,” passionate about dance as devotion to God to the very end.  She and David had more than dancing for God in common. Something  Joseph Campbell, writing on the power of myth, once said:

“People say that what we’re all seeking is a meaning for life. I don’t think that’s what we’re really seeking. I think that what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances with our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.”

David danced before God, inside that rapture of being alive. So did Margaret. Somehow they found a way to experience the connection between their innermost being in love and devotion to God, and their physical bodies. They discovered the possibility of experiencing a kind of unity within the experience of being alive in dance, a oneness- if you will- that is profoundly spiritual.

I’ve been practicing liturgical and sacred dance in churches since those early days of the 1980s. One thing I’ve learned over the years is that you don’t have to be part of the dance choir to experience this ‘oneness.’

Here’s what I mean. I’d been leading dance in this one church for maybe five or six years when one Sunday, an older woman (I was in my early 40s then) came up to me at the end of worship. Our large intergenerational group had just moved together to the singing of The Lord’s Prayer. This woman stood before me with tears streaming down her face. She, herself a preacher’s kid,  said this (a kind of confession): “Oh, Bunny. I have really not liked this dance business you’ve been doing, I have opposed it all along. But I must tell you that today:  I understood it. Thank you.”

When-in your journey- have do you felt what Campbell calls “the rapture of being alive?”

So many possibilities, right? If we shared and gathered these together what would we learn?

Meanwhile, Bailas?

Amen.

1. Stan Mast, commentary.  2. [Kathryn Dickason](mailto:communication@dornsife.usc.edu) March 31, 2021