

JESUS AND THE DANCERS
2 SAMUEL 6.1-5, 12B-19; MARK 6.14-29
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PENTECOST +7
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Last week we shook the dust off our feet. We welcomed and blessed the day. We lined up alongside the disciples and took our instructions to enter simply into the world, accepting welcome where we find it, to live into the Jesus Way together. We gathered at this table and shared of the bread and the cup. It was simple. It was good. It was a recommitment, a remembering, a fresh start, a vow. **It is easy to follow Jesus' teaching on days like that.**

We know the power of gathering people who commit themselves as one to a cause. In a couple of months we will be talking about the CROP Hunger Walk. We'll don matching t-shirts, walk along the Avenue with dozens of others, and raise money and awareness about local and global matters of food insecurity. It will be a great day. It will feel like we've made a dent for good in this world.

When we gather in these ways, side-by-side, encouraging one another, birthing a movement from a moment, the impact of our efforts begins to ripple outward. We develop something of a reputation. The neighbors wonder what we're up to next. We begin to be known as people of a certain Way who are committed to unleashing goodness and beauty in the world.

So imagine if we carried ourselves in the ways the disciples did. Imagine if we took our movement to a new level of teaching and preaching and healing. Imagine we're far beyond the walls of this place, and our impact and influence is growing. People are more committed to this **Way** we are teaching than they are to anything else—their former lives, their current fear, their oppressive government. When those efforts begin to ripple outward, more than just the neighbors are noticing.

In Mark chapter 6, the movement of the Jesus Way has gotten this kind of attention. People are not behaving like the compliant Roman citizens they used to be. When a Roman guard forces a Galilean to carry his pack for a mile, these Jesus Way people smile when their task is done and say, "It's good to be out walking. The sun is bright, the breeze off the lake is lovely, let's go another mile." No one does that, so the stories spread quickly. When that same guard strikes the pack-wearing-Galilean across the face, the man stands and waits for the guard to strike him again. This time there's a glimmer in his eyes, is it a smirk? He's not just up for a two-mile walk, he's making a point. The Jesus Way has a dangerous edge to it. Those stories spread even more quickly.

The stories spread until Herod hears of it, "for Jesus' name had become known." A chill went down Herod's spine. "I thought I'd taken care of this already," he said to those reporting but mostly to himself. This sounds like John who was forever stirring people up and turning

amenable citizens into rabble rousers. The others whisper among themselves and think the stories they are hearing about Jesus sound like a powerful prophet. Like Elijah. Herod is still stuck on this John the baptizer thing; surely John has been raised from the dead. He cannot imagine a better response for what he is hearing. Herod and his colleagues don't yet know that you cannot kill the kingdom of God. You cannot crush the Way of the Spirit. And the gospel writer knows all too well that Herod and the others will surely try.

Herod then remembers for us the night that he saw to it John would die.

Clay Cotton faithfully creates a children's worship bulletin each week according to the sermon text. He called the church office mid-week asking, "The text this week. Mark 6. Ah....Do we really want to put John the Baptist's head on a platter for the children?"

It's not a feel-good story, is it? A banquet. A party thrown by Herod, for Herod, in celebration of himself. A dance, a deal, a weak will, a head on a platter to appease a wrongly-acquired wife.

Martin Luther is said to have reminded students of scripture, "Sometimes you have to squeeze a biblical passage until it yields good news." And so we squeeze this morning.

I suggested that Clay use the 2 Samuel image, instead. It's another dancing story. Another image of power. Another scene of a leader responding to the presence of God in his midst. David knows his own power is somehow wrapped up in God's, even if he wrongly conflates the two at times. He wants this ark of God, with its power to bless and destroy, to be in his possession. He dances with unashamed delight before the ark of the covenant, even if he still secretly carries the notion that God can be owned and contained by any king of earth. He dances because he has remembered God when so many have forgotten.

David makes some mistakes in this story, and Uzzah becomes the illustration. First, "[t]he ark wasn't meant to be put on a cart," notes Ken Evers-Hood, "but was supposed to be carried by priests, on poles. With the ark on their backs, the priests could feel the weight of God's presence with them. The only people who had put the ark on a cart before were the Philistines.

The second mistake the Israelites made was forgetting to offer a sacrifice. They were singing and dancing and making a big racket. David wanted all of the benefits of the ark, but he didn't want to invest in the work, the time or the money the institution of the ark demanded."¹

Initially, David's delight is in seizing God's blessing for himself. He doesn't honor the work and care and personal commitment to welcoming God's presence. He wants a quick and lazy path to power, and it costs an innocent man his life. Once the shock of this truth wears off, David returns to the ark dressed in a priestly garment. He sees to it the ark is carried properly this time, the group moves six paces with the ark and then makes sacrifices before God. Then

¹ <http://www.faithandleadership.com/ken-evers-hood-what-are-you-living-thats-bigger-you>

he and the party continue to move toward Jerusalem with celebration and dancing, sacrifices of well-being and blessing of all people.

David is going to forget again. He's going to make more mistakes. But for now, in this moment, he is trying to get it right. And mysteriously, somehow, God's presence remains with David as the two delight in each other.

David's grasp at power destroys a man who was merely following the instructions given to him by his king because that king didn't take seriously what it meant to welcome God's presence into their world. David becomes angry and afraid. Like jumping back from a hot pan on a stove, David realized his approach was wrong. He regrouped. He prepared himself. He returned to God more earnestly, more sincerely, more aware that any life he hoped to have was intimately connected to the life in that mysterious box heading his way. And somehow his own success and power required better care of the people in his midst than he had shown for Uzzah.

Herod's fear and desire to hold onto power kills an honest man who baptized and blessed and dared speak out in truth. Herod could use his authority to stop it. He could oppose those around him who call for death. But he doesn't. To do so would cost him too much personally and politically. Yet in calling for death, he remains afraid—ever looking over his shoulder, quite certain he's seen a ghost.

Whichever way we choose in life, there are costs. Just as there is a cost to protecting one's own interests, there is a cost to pairing up and going out in Jesus' name. There will be people who welcome you and people who won't. There will be opportunities to speak truth to power and opportunities to cave and dance in the court of the kingdoms of this world.

Like David, we want God's blessing and we want it the easy way. We want to send that prayer out into the ether, "God grant me peace. God give me the job. God send money. God heal my friend. God make us people who live in Your Way. God send us others to walk alongside us. God bless our lives and bless this place in Jesus name." But we do not give our flesh to back up these requests.² We hope not for God but for a fairy godmother who turns pumpkins into coaches and dirty rags into ball gowns. **Our prayers are nothing more than wishes if we are not giving our lives to the words we speak.**

The peace comes with a committed practice to living out its way. The job comes with work and focus and determination. The Jesus Way comes only by days and months and years of its living. The people to walk alongside will annoy and nag and argue just as they will encourage and support and laugh. This place will only be blessed in Jesus' name if the people within it are daily living into Jesus' Way. No fairy godmother fixes here.

Jesus' disciples hear what has happened to John, and it shakes them. They claim the body and bury it properly. Then they go to tell Jesus. But Jesus already knows that sometimes "not welcome" means being turned away from a home or a town and sometimes "not welcome"

² Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing*, "Our prayers need our flesh to back them up."

looks like a head served on a platter. His students are just starting to figure out that this Way has implications.

David Lose writes, "First, Jesus' ministry, like John's, has significant political implications. And I don't mean 'political' in the sense of who to vote for. No, I mean that the kingdom Jesus preaches challenges our penchant for the status quo and our all too easy acquiescence with the cultural presumption that might (or wealth or status or fame) makes right. Proclaim God's kingdom of mercy and grace and, as with Jesus and his forerunner John, there will be costs to pay."³

These stories show our options. Where are you in this mix of characters?

Putting on a show, wasting your time, dancing in the wrong court? Grasping for power, moving in fear, calculating the next move? Throwing banquets for the people who will scratch your back and advance your standing? Dancing even if it elicits judgment and disdain? Throwing a banquet for any and all who will come and blessing them in the name of the Lord? Committing to God's Way, welcoming the risk, embracing the cost, giving your life to the mystery?

The way of Herod is back-room deals and tit-for-tat. This way breeds shame and scarcity, competition and ego, anger and fear. The way of Herod is small and easily lost. Herod must fight and kill and go against his own instincts if he is to hold onto any semblance of power and prestige at all. **We know this way for it is still the way of much of our world.**

The Way of Jesus is building steam and on the move. This is the way of Spirit and breath, of plenty and of wholeness. **The Way of Jesus doesn't stop at borders of nation or empire, of clean or unclean, of sinner or sacred.** It's not the way of Kings or of Rulers. The Way of Jesus is breaking bread and passing baskets of fish and passing around whatever else you have to share until everyone is invited to the feast, until everyone is fed. It's the Way that will make David dance in his ephod or Herod turn white with the news that maybe, just maybe, the dead has come alive again.

Which way will become ours?

³ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1621>