

Proper 17 – 14 Pentecost – Year C – August 29, 2010
Jeremiah 2:4-13; Psalm 81:1, 10-16; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14
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Are you ready to dance? There have been several popular television dance shows like *Come Dancing*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, and *Dancing With the Stars*. Each form of dance has its own stylistic elements and movements. In square dancing, Dick Waibel provides several styling tips for better dancing. These include music, dance steps, posture, believe the caller, and understand the definition. Caller, Dave Walker, says, “If you stumble, make it part of the dance!” The Holy Trinity is described as a kind of cosmic dance: a dynamic, vital, and life-giving relationship between the three persons of the Godhead. Not coincidentally, dancing is also a wonderful metaphor for life. You can dance on your own, but it’s much more fun when you dance with others.

At the beginning of our reading from the letter to the Hebrews today it says, “Let mutual love continue.” Mutual love is then described as acts of hospitality. The scriptural allusion is from Genesis, when Abraham and Sarah showed hospitality to the strangers who brought them good news of Sarah’s impending pregnancy. Hospitality in the dance of life is like our faith. Accepting the gift of faith in Christ is an act of hospitality, welcoming Jesus into our hearts. In square dancing, we keep our hands open so that we can receive the blessing of fellowship and the guiding touch of our partners. We experience hospitality in our fellowship around the Lord’s Table. By participating in Holy Communion, we join with saints past and present, and with the unseen heavenly powers in a feast of love. Most of all we enter with joy and gratitude into the rhythm of life in Christ. In sharing table fellowship, we enter more deeply into the promise of God’s eternal love in the body and blood of our Lord and savior. This is one part of God’s gracious abundance in caring for us and providing for our needs. Martin Luther speaks of Holy Communion as the “visible word” in which God feeds us with the presence of Jesus Christ. In Proverbs 16:9 we read, “The human mind plans the way, but the LORD directs the steps.” By faith, as in dancing, we believe the caller. Yet we have to reflect on who or what is calling our steps. Whose voice do we seek, yearn and listen to above all others in this noisy world?

The author of the letter to the Hebrews exhorts us to show hospitality to strangers. No less important is our compassionate ministry to the wounded, including those who are imprisoned or being tortured. If we cannot participate in the visitation and care of those in prison, then we can pray for all prisoners, work for those who are wrongly imprisoned, and seek justice where prisoners are tortured or abused. Closer to home we can easily find other forms of imprisonment that often lead to violence. The prison of addictions seems inextricably bound and shaped by violence towards others and ourselves. The low self-esteem of an abuser that holds a spouse captive in a dangerous cycle of emotional and verbal, physical and psychological violence is another example. There are many prisons and numerous forms of torture, which all demean human dignity. All undermine our intrinsic and immeasurable worth as children of a loving God. God continues to call us to respect the dignity of every human being, and seek the face of Christ in everyone. As people of faith, in our own struggles, we too can say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.” Our confidence comes from listening to God’s voice, our caller, if you like, who “will never leave [us] or forsake [us]” in accordance with God’s Word.

As followers of Christ, Scripture is like music to our ears. Bernard of Clairvaux, the great monastic leader who lived in the 12th century, took the primacy of Scripture in the lives of the faithful very seriously. Modern theology has expanded to welcome a new square: Scripture, tradition, reason and experience. For Bernard, they are mutually penetrating, and move together. However, Scripture has priority because it is the word of God to the church. Scripture corrects and shapes us like the leading partner in our community dance. We turn to our leaders for guidance in understanding Scripture, just as the letter to the Hebrews recommends. Since Jesus is “the same yesterday and today and forever” our posture as Christians in the dance of life must be to seek out those whose lives closely mirror Christ’s, who study God’s word, who stay close to God in

prayer, and who gather to worship God. In learning a dance move, we strive to understanding the definition of the call so that we can answer in whatever circumstances we may find ourselves. From a spiritual perspective, that is the principle of understanding the spirit of God's word, not just the letter of the Law. Even though Scripture is ancient, it is still relevant. In the spirit of understanding Jesus' way of defining God's character, God's will, God's desire for our lives, every generation re-creates the posture of servant leadership, of loving God without compromise, of loving our neighbors as ourselves. Within that posture is the attitude of worship towards God in Christ Jesus, which is a continual "sacrifice of praise to God." When our ears are attuned to the music of the Spirit, our hearts are open to God's guidance, revealing God's truth and beauty in all the steps of our spiritual journey.

Dancing in a group of people means that we have to practice avoidance techniques so that we don't collide, fall or otherwise injure each other. Our passage from Hebrews notes two particular aspects of life where avoidance can save us a lot of hurt and pain. The first is about sexual relationships within the covenant of marriage. The second is about money. One is about loving the wrong person, the other, loving the wrong things. If we fail to avoid the pitfalls, the results are always damaging to ourselves and to the Body of Christ. Spiritually, the issue of infidelity is akin to defiling our relationship with Christ and with one another. In the context of this passage, and our understanding of Christ's gift to us, infidelity concerns the issue of purity. In other words, our cleanness of heart, washed from sin by the blood of our savior, Christ Jesus. Earlier in Hebrews, Jesus is described as the great high priest who purifies our hearts and bodies. Infidelity in relationship cuts much deeper than the emotional trauma, and agony inflicted on a partner or spouse. To be unfaithful is to deny the sanctifying work of Christ. In many parts of Scripture, Israel's unfaithfulness and idolatry is described in sexual terms. Fulfilling a fleeting sexual desire with the wrong person is idolatrous, because it puts selfish pleasure ahead of God, and God's will. By God's grace and our faith in Christ, our relationships reflect the fact that we are set apart, and actively being transformed into Christ-likeness, living in faithfulness to God and one another.

As for our love of money, it's interesting that the letter ties together the fear and insecurity of abandonment with the love of money. Many of us think of money as the means of our security, which leaves us feeling hopeless and consumed with fear when the stock market crashes, house prices plummet, our portfolio evaporates, or when we lose our jobs. Worshipping money is worshipping the wrong god, one that is unstable and capricious, one that comes and goes, and ultimately cares nothing for us, because money is without heart or conscience. We cannot worship God and money. Only God gives us the gifts of salvation and healing, eternal life, and our daily bread. Since we all like to think that we're in control and can provide for ourselves, we might not appreciate God's just-in-time methods, like giving us **today** our daily bread. Nonetheless, we are dependent on God alone, even though God has made us stewards of His generous gifts. In square dancing if we fail to step up and make the right move, the square breaks down, and we all become frustrated and irritated. If we fail to step up and help one another when and where there is need, we have stumbled in the dance. We have lost our connection with God, our caller. We have lost the rhythm of the music. It is evident that we have forgotten the definition of the basic steps to a good and joyful life, sharing God's grace generously with open hands.

The summation of Godly living in the letter to the Hebrews provides us with vital steps in the dance. God's gracious *abundance*. Living in *accordance* with God's will, with the *guidance* of the Holy Spirit. *Avoidance* of temptations is best, yet when we fall, we must make our stumbles part of the dance, by returning to God. Life in Christ is not a spectator sport. We know God's presence in the rhythm of every heartbeat. When we hear the music, let's be sure to get up and dance!

Amen.