

Want to Dance?

It was a beautiful autumn evening in nineteen seventy-two. October eighth, to be exact. It happened right here in South Carolina—at Charleston Air Force Base. He was a young airman, twenty-two years old. He'd gone to the NCO club with a buddy that night.

She also had come to the club with a friend. She was just eighteen—not long out of high school. Her friend knew his buddy, and as those two talked with one another, he saw her for the very first time.

Later, he looked across the dance floor, and there she was. He walked over to her and said, “Want to dance?”

And so they began to dance, moving in unison to the beat of the music. Then they slow-danced together. That evening, on that same dance floor, they kissed, as the band played “I can see clearly now.”

But they couldn't see into the future. They didn't realize that, as they danced, a loving relationship was being born. They didn't know, that first night, that they would share a life together.

These two have a grandson now. Last month, they celebrated their forty-fourth wedding anniversary. And sometimes, in their kitchen, they still dance!

True story.

This Sunday we hear another account—one of *gospel* truth—in our reading from Matthew. Jesus has instructed his disciples and has gone out to preach in the surrounding villages and towns. But the crowds we hear him teaching today haven't been too receptive. Just as they haven't been too receptive of John the Baptist.

John's fiery message of judgment and repentance has been heard as a prophecy of doom and gloom. He's been labeled a recluse. A gaunt figure whose unconventional appearance and whose abstaining lifestyle are considered just plain strange.

Then, on the other hand, here comes Jesus—not abstaining at all, but feasting and imbibing. And proclaiming a reign of goodness and peace, of abundant life and limitless love. And they call him a drunk and a partier who hangs out with the wrong sort of people.

In these words of Jesus that we read today, you can hear frustration. Even exasperation. Could he be reproaching not only

the unfaithful and unrepentant among his first hearers, but those of *any* time—including our own—when he says: *This generation—what am I going to do with you? We play a funeral dirge and you won't mourn. You've rejected John's message. And you're rejecting my message, too. For when I invite you to celebrate, you won't dance, either. You don't want to dance.*

My sisters and brothers, this morning, let's reflect together on dancing as a fitting metaphor for being in relationship with Jesus Christ.

Most of us, at one time or another, come to this relationship with burdens. But it's not easy to dance with heavy burdens on your back. When we try to dance while bearing all kinds of burdens, what we actually end up doing is staggering. Under the weight of all kinds of baggage. Anxieties no one else knows about. Secret concerns, old hurts, and new fears not expressed to another living person.

The apostle Paul knew a lot about baggage and burdens. Even Paul, who wrote much of the New Testament and traveled tirelessly as the great Christian missionary to the Gentiles—yes, even Paul had experience with the burden called sin. Today we

hear him sharing those deeply personal struggles with believers in Rome—and with you and me.

The thing is, from the very beginning—from our first parents on—there’s been something in our nature as fallen human creatures that urges us to dance to our *own* tune. We’re hard-wired to do our own dance. We know the steps we’re supposed to take—steps that are God’s good intention for us to take—but we don’t always take them. We know the steps we’re *not* supposed to take—steps that are not in accordance with God’s gracious will for us. But sometimes we take them anyway. Steps that put distance between us and the One who loves us.

And the knowledge that we have taken these steps becomes a guilty burden. A burden that wears us out. A millstone of sin that drags us down. Even *canceled* sin—for which you and I have already repented and been forgiven. The adversary loves to remind us of our past! It’s like a load we lug around all the time. It’s weighty. Sometimes it feels as though we’ll never be able to put it down. And so you and I cry out with Paul: *Who will rescue me?*

But before we can even finish getting this question out of our mouths, Jesus—the answer to our question—is talking to us again.

More tenderly, this time. And his words lift us out of our despair: *Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens. Rest in my word. Be in prayerful communion with me—both speaking and listening. Bring your burdens to me. I'll help you bear those burdens. And they will suddenly seem very light.*

But that's not all. Jesus has another offer for you. *Will you dance with me?* he asks. *If you will, I'll teach you new rhythms. You'll no longer be programmed to take the same old steps that left you empty and desolate. I'll guide you into new patterns for living, new ways of moving to the music. I'll show you new steps. I'll show you how to follow in my footsteps.*

Now if you've ever danced with a partner, you know that one dancer needs to lead. And the other dancer needs to follow. If there are two followers, it just doesn't work. And if *both* dancers are trying to lead? Well, that results in all *kinds* of problems.

What if Ginger Rogers had tried to lead when she was dancing with Fred Astaire? She probably would not be remembered today as the one who did everything Fred did, but did it backward *and* while wearing high heels!

But she wasn't the leader. There was just one leader. There *is* just one leader.

One of the issues for us contemporary North American Christians is that our society prizes rugged individualism and independence. Self-reliance and self-sufficiency. Our culture values leaders and attempts to train us from birth to *be* leaders. Being a follower is countercultural.

But following is precisely what Christ calls you to do. He calls you to surrender your need to be in control. He calls you to follow more nearly so that you and he—two dancers—move beautifully together as one. With the same steps and the same rhythm. To the same tempo and the same melody. Flawlessly choreographed. Perfectly in tune. And in intimate relationship with one another.

When you enter into relationship with Jesus Christ and you see him with eyes of faith, it's God you're seeing. When you enter into relationship with Jesus Christ, God is revealed in him. When you enter into relationship with Jesus Christ and begin learning to know him more clearly, you're learning to know God more clearly.

This God is the One who—as the psalmist sings—turns your mourning into dancing. This is the One who makes sorrow flee away. This is the One who asks you to join the dance!

The dance of joy. Dancing is all about joy. And joy marks your life in Christ.

Joy's not the same as happiness, is it? Joy takes you by surprise. Joy astonishes. Joy is richer, joy is fuller, joy is sweeter than happiness, which is short-lived. Jesus doesn't promise happiness. Jesus doesn't promise that following him won't entail suffering. But he who knows suffering does promise to be *with* you in suffering. Even in the midst of suffering, he's walking with you. Talking with you. He's dancing with you today! And filling your deepest places with joy.

So, beloved, take joy in following the lead of this Jesus who has come eating and drinking. Because, soon and very soon, your Lord is throwing a party. An amazing party to which he invites *you!* There will be feasting. There will be celebrating. And there will be dancing. His desire is to lead you in the dance—to be in loving relationship with you. And you'll keep on dancing, with the joyous assurance that he lives in you and you live in him. Always and forever!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.