

“I’d Still Rather Be Dancing”

Marcia Brumbaugh

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In late June, I stood up here during announcements and told you that while we were in between our minister and our prospective interim minister, we needed to fill the pulpit. I suggested that you all had stories to tell us about how in your own way you have learned, in the beautiful words of Micah, “to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” And I encouraged you to find a quiet place in which to discover those words and to find the courage to stand up and share them with us.

And many you have. In inspirational ways and words, you have stood up at this pulpit and told us your story. I feel honored and humbled and deeply appreciative that you have done so. I am proud to be a part of a congregation where this is possible. Thank you.

And I’m up here today because I didn’t think it was right for me to challenge you as I did without challenging myself at the same time. I’ve done this only before, seventeen years ago. Then, as many of you remember, John Bury was our Interim Minister. I was Moderator. One of John’s conditions when he accepted employment was that he and I have lunch once a month to get to know each other and to talk about the state of the church. I enjoyed these lunches very much, and we did, in fact, get to know each other pretty well. After several months, John began to challenge me to tell you my story. I think it took him over a year before he was finally able to convince me that I had something to say that people might actually be interested in.

The process of finding those words and sharing them was scary and ultimately very rewarding. I didn’t know exactly what I felt, what guided me, what helped me walk with my God until I forced myself to give my feelings and ideas words. Thank you, John.

So when I committed myself to talk this Sunday, I went back and read that old sermon of mine, which I’d entitled “I’d Rather Be Dancing,” primarily to ask myself if I am still guided in the ways I was then. Had my ideas changed? And if not, what more did I have to say?

Certainly, my life has changed significantly. When I talked to you 17 years ago, I had just come out into the light after spending some years in a sometimes pretty dark and challenging tunnel. This time, not only am I older – and not necessarily wiser – but my dear husband Mark has entered my life and we have been happily married for the last 13 ½ years. In so many important respects, life is easier now because I have him to share life’s joys and challenges with, because, in other words, I have him to dance with.

As I read my old sermon, and filter its ideas through the screen of a happy marriage and the challenges of growing older, I realize that what I had to say seventeen years ago is even more important to me now. So I feel compelled to share some of it with you again. In the highly unlikely possibility that any of you out there might remember that first sermon, I apologize ahead of time if I bore you. I promise to add some twists and some new ideas.

I love to dance. I’m not remarkably skilled, and I don’t dance as often as I did seventeen years ago, but I LOVE TO DANCE. I love the feeling of my body moving in rhythm to lots of different kinds of music; I love the feeling of moving with another person to that music. One day when I was dancing many years ago, I had an epiphany. I realized that dancing was not only fun, it brought me joy, deep, resounding joy. And I realized that when I was joyful, I couldn’t help sharing that joy with others. Let me tell you, when you’re in a room or on a dance floor with a whole lot of joyful people, that happiness feeds your spirit.

So it is natural that I would again enlist an often-used metaphor, the dance, to symbolize the ways in which we might face life as Christians. Let me give you a couple of examples of this metaphor in song.

The first appears in a song written by a local folksinger named Libby Roderick called “Dancing in Front of the Guns.” Ellen and I sung it for you eons ago at family camp. Some of the words to the song go like this:

We’re facing the guns again,
We have faced them before,
Humanity’s longing, after so many deaths,
For something more human than war.

But part of me whispers.
Take your body and run away,
Leave the vision to somebody else, then I hear myself say
I'd rather be dancing
At the edge of my grave.
I rather be holding you close as we
March forward loving and brave.
I'd rather be singing
In the face of my fear.
I'd rather be dancing in front of the guns as long as I'm here.

To me, this song is more than an anti-war song. It is also a song about the ways in which we chose to face the wounds within ourselves, or the conflicts that we encounter in our personal lives. It is a song about acceptance and courage and compassion and joy and laughter. It is a song about the dance that I'd like to talk about today.

This dance is the dance which I believe Christ leads us in. Consider these words in "Lord of the Dance":

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

What is the nature of this dance which Libby Roderick says she'd rather be dancing at the edge of her grave? What is the nature of the dance which Christ, as the Lord of the Dance, leads us in today as his followers? I'd like to suggest that two of its components are joy and compassion.

Perhaps it doesn't surprise you that I believe the first component of this dance is joy. Deb and Dennis recently suggested to us that an additional commandment should be "Thou Shalt Rejoice." I couldn't agree more. I think we should throw ourselves into whatever gives us joy – whether it is dancing, being out-of-doors, reading, playing baseball, eating vegetables, fishing, making quilts, being with children, baking bread or standing on our head. And when you involve yourself in

something that brings you great joy, I believe firmly that you are rejoicing. Watch Fermen and Jeanette when they sing. Does anyone doubt that they are rejoicing?

I also believe that laughter and silliness can be a component of rejoicing. So I suggest a corollary to Deb and Dennis' commandment: Thou shalt laugh, as hard and as often as you can. And if you can get away with abject, harmless silliness, as the children and I just did, Amen.

I'm sure Biblical scholars have a lot to say about what Jesus meant when he said that we should become like children, when he said that to children belongs the kingdom of heaven. Is it possible that Jesus meant, at least in part, that we should laugh and experience and share joy as fully and unreservedly as does a child and that by doing so we experience "the kingdom of heaven?"

I don't know how to explain what happens to us physiologically or psychologically when we share laughter with another. I just know that we feel better, and that we relax and bond. My dear friend Lisa Balivet and I bonded many years ago at our church family camp when she taught us "Ruptasha." I am told Better Midler once said, "If you make me laugh, you have a friend for life." Lisa, I'm yours.

I don't think there's any question that laughter can also help us heal. My sister is a nurse who works in a pain management unit at Queen's Hospital in Honolulu where she often treats people who are in chronic pain. In doing so, she has discovered that laughter and humor not only eases their pain but actually helps them to heal. So she has spread the word of her discovery in a couple of ways. One is by creating character named Ivy Push who sits in on a portable commode in a supply closet when her shift ends and talks to God. Ivy has also talked to a lot of doctors and nurses at medical conferences all over the United States.

The other thing my sister has done has been to create a non-profit business which provides to hospitals who subscribe an ever-changing collection of healthy and funny videoed skits she calls "The Chuckles Network." Patients in these hospitals can then watch the Chuckles channel on their television. And laugh. And, hopefully, heal.

I think my sister named her business after our father. His name was Charles, and people called him the usual derivations of that name: Chuck, Charley. In his later

years, some friends and family began to call him “Chuckles” because he loved to laugh. He often said he didn’t care what people called him as long as it wasn’t late to dinner. He knew that was an old, perhaps stale joke, and that fact just made it funnier for him. My father’s laughter was infectious: he laughed so long and hard that soon everyone in the room was laughing with him. Ultimately, we were all on the floor, holding our sides, and crying. And my father took his humor seriously. He knew that his humor not only amused but comforted people. His humor was his gift and perhaps part of his personal ministry. The picture I have here, of the laughing Jesus, is his gift to our church.

Although our Puritan ancestors did not agree, I obviously think there’s a real place for healthy humor and laughter in our religious celebrations. There is a genre in the joke world called “church jokes.” Do you remember the old joke from The Family Circus comics strip? In this particular strip, the children in this family come home from Sunday school and they tell their father that when they sang their mommy’s favorite hymn, they learned God’s name. “You did?” asks their father. “What is it?” “Andy,” his son said firmly. And he proceeds to sing, “And he walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own....” “Funny,” says the father, “I thought I was your mother’s favorite him.”

There are a lot of truly funny church jokes out there like that wonderful moldy oldie. But I would like to suggest that place of joy and laughter in our celebrations and in our faith has a much deeper importance. When we are joyful, when we laugh together, when we rejoice, we celebrate our shared belief that God loves us unconditionally, and that with that faith, we can fight the darkness. So, as I asked the children, does God like it when we laugh? Does God like it when we are silly, and especially, when we share laughter with others? Does God like it when we use our humor as we dance with others to ease their pain? Perhaps especially then.

That brings me to the second component of the dance that I’d like to talk about today: compassion. I believe that we dance together when we share joy and compassion. In “Lord of the Dance,” Christ says he “danced on a Friday when the sky turned black; it’s hard to dance with the Devil on your back.” While it may seem obvious that it is hard to dance when “the sky turns black,” when we are wounded, when we are hurting and grieving and in anguish, I would also suggest

that at those moments, we need the dance the most and, at the same time learn the most about how to move in the dance.

Like all of you, I am sure, my life has had its challenges. The death of my mother when she was 41 and I, 11; a tumultuous adolescence with a stepmother with whom I seriously clashed; the end of a marriage for which I once had much hope; several significant health issues; and sixteen years as a working, single parent all gave me much need for the dance. How, under these circumstances, could I believe Jesus' words: "Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh?" Laugh? Survive maybe. Endure, I'll do my best. But laugh?! Dance?!

I did come to laugh and dance again. The compassion and support of other people made all the difference and were essential to my recovery.

There are many examples of this caring. They include my friend who daily rose at 5:30 am to run two miles with me in the empty California dawn during those early months of my divorce; my eleven year old sixth grade daughter, Lesley, who set aside her emerging adolescence to voluntarily get up a half an hour early to make breakfasts and lunches for us so I could begin my long commute to law school at 7am;; the friend who, after my cancer surgery, kept me company every evening at the hospital, sometimes bringing his work in to do at my bedside, because he knew I was most afraid and alone during those hours. And then there was the friend who came to see me at home when I was recovering from my mastectomy. He handed a catalog page on which was a picture of a stylish woman's suit with a simple jacket. He thought I might need it, he explained, and asked me, with a straight face, whether I would be able to wear my double-breasted suit coats any more. If I busted a stitch when I howled with laughter, I didn't care.

The immeasurable support of these and many other loving people helped me to accept the finality of my mother's departure, the end of a marriage, the loss of a breast and the hearing in one ear, the threat of the return of breast cancer or another crippling MS episode. Though when I was sick or was facing surgery, I knew no one else can be sick or have that surgery for me, I learned that when my friends shared my loneliness and fear and pain with compassion, my pain eased. I also came to see that when my wounds were understood and felt and shared and seen as integral to our human condition, I could accept them.

And I learned something even more important. I learned that when we accept our wounds and let our pain, fear, and despair give rise to compassion for others, we become “wounded healers,” people who have found a way of accepting their own wounds and who, in the process, have found a way of making their wounds a source of healing power for others. Isn’t this exactly what Paul meant when he said that God comforts us in all our afflictions, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves receive from God?

Rabbi Kushner, who’s Book When Bad things Happen to Good People I prize highly, describes this process very beautifully. He says that we who have been hurt can take “the white heat of our pain and anguish and send it into someone else’s life, so that their life will be warmer and brighter because of us.” He says, in fact, that God comes to those who are wounded in the incarnation of good and loving people, people who have chosen to “blow on the embers of the heart.”

Rabbi Kushner tells a wonderful story which describes this process well. There was a little boy, he says, whose bicycle had been run over by a car and destroyed. The boy cried over this loss. Several days later, he was late returning from school. When his mother asked him where he had been, he said he had stopped to help another little boy down the street whose bicycle had also been damaged. The little boy’s mother asked him, “Why did you stop to help? You don’t know how to fix bicycles. “I know, “said the little boy.” I stopped to help him cry.”

I would like to suggest when we take our wounds, whether they result from the death of a person we loved, the rebellion of our own body, or the loss of a relationship and extend the compassion we have gained from our own experience to ease the pain and comfort the wounds of others, we are dancing. And likewise, when we share our joy, our play, and our laughter with others to ease and to comfort them, like my sister does, we are dancing. We who have wept, laugh. We become like children. Is it too much to suggest that in this moment, we are experiencing the kingdom of God?

Like those people who comforted me in my lowest moments, you are also wounded healers. In my 23 years in this church, I have seen you over and over again wrap your arms around others who are ill, or struggling with challenges of a handicap or of old age, or mourning the end of a relationship, or grieving the

unbearable loss of a child or another loved one. You have comforted me more times than you know. And I can tell you that that the “white heat” of your care and love and compassion is life-giving. You somehow make the unbearable, bearable.

And something else happens to us as wounded healers when we share our lives, our pain, and our joys with others. We, too, are strengthened. In some very real and spooky and humbling way, we find God, and we transcend our own mortality. We experience God’s grace.

We are all wounded healers. And as we hold each other and move in our dance, we move in a rhythm, sometimes exuberant and joyful, sometimes slow and solemn, a healing rhythm in which Christ leads us. This is the dance I want to dance. And I’d still rather be dancing, my dear friends, with you.