

Sermon for July 12, 2015 (Proper 10, Year B)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: 2 Samuel 6:1-5,12b-23; Mark 6:14-29

Know what: to know God is to celebrate with the most real joy

So what: no other joy can compare

Now what: celebrate with dancing, singing and eating

Title: Leaping and dancing before the LORD

My friends, we don't dance enough.

It's true! This is a simple fact. As Americans, we don't dance very much at all.

When is the last time that you danced? I mean REALLY danced. The last time that you got into it so much that you started to sweat? Can you even remember?

In the Church, we speak of our Sunday gatherings as "Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist". This is what the Church does, what the Body of Christ does when we gather together week after week.

At the Lord's Table, we CELEBRATE the whole story of creation and redemption.

But there is something missing in our celebrations. Do you know what it is?

Now, stop and think for a moment about how human beings celebrate around the world. In every culture, in every society, in every tribe, in every nation – all throughout time – when human beings gather to celebrate, they always do 3 basic things. Always! These are non-negotiable. These three are constants in every human experience.

What are these 3 things basic to every human celebration?

1. Eating.
2. Singing.
3. Dancing.

No matter where you go in the world, no matter what generation, when people gather to celebrate, they eat, they sing, and they dance.

Sometimes other things are added into the celebration, but those 3 things are always included.

Always, that is...except here. Except in the Church!
In OUR celebrations, we eat and we sing....but we NEVER dance.
Why is that?

Now let's be clear about one thing! This eating, singing and dancing is not about skill or quality or performance.

When we sing, we are called to make a joyful noise to the LORD! And everyone needs to open their mouths in praise, regardless of whether or not you know how to sing!

True celebration is not about performance. We are not a choral society. We gather to make a joyful noise in celebration of what God has done – and the quality of the tone makes no difference at all.

The same goes for our eating. I'm not referring to Coffee Hour, which we tend to do pretty darn well here at Saint Mary's! I've been to some really BAD Coffee Hours in other places. But not here! No, we do Coffee Hour RIGHT here at Saint Mary's.

Our celebratory eating is what we call Communion. The Body and Blood of Christ. And it will not surprise any of you to learn that the QUALITY of the meal at the Lord's Table is NOT the first thing that your parish leadership considers when preparing for Communion.

It was a Roman Catholic theologian, Aidan Kavanaugh – I believe, who famously responded to the theological question about discerning the real presence of the Lord Jesus in the bread and wine of communion by saying, "It is easier for me to believe that a communion wafer is the actual Body of Christ than it is for me to believe that it is actually BREAD!"

I point out these disclaimers about quality and performance, because I know what most of you will say to me about dancing, "Oh, I'm not very good at it."
But that, my friends, is no excuse.

Have any of you been to a wedding recently? Anyone here this morning?

Can any of you imagine the father of the bride demurring and saying, “No, I’m sorry. I can’t take the first dance with you, my daughter, because I can’t dance. I’m not very good at it.”

Can you imagine that? Wouldn’t that be quite inappropriate for him to say?
At a wedding feast, you forget about such concerns, right?
That is not the time to worry about your dancing performance.
It is simply the time to enter into the celebration, to be carried away by it!

And THAT is what happened to King David. And I hope that it happens to you as you become carried away in celebrating the goodness of God.

Both of our stories from Holy Scripture today are focused upon dancing, but they lead to very different outcomes.

King Herod had someone dance for him at his birthday celebration.
He was probably too embarrassed to dance himself. He cared too much about the opinions of others, more than he did for the opinion of God.
John the Baptist paid the price for his social etiquette.

King David, however, cared more about God than about the rules of proper social conduct.

And so he was singing and dancing and leaping around in the air. I guess he was so carried away in his celebration, so hot and sweaty, that he stripped down to his underwear!

It was a real celebration. There was singing, dancing, and eating – loaves of bread, meat, and cakes for all the people.

(At our later celebration this morning, we will sing one of the great hymns in our Hymnal appointed for a Baptism. It is Number 296. Perhaps you know the first stanza – it goes like this:)

Did you pay attention to the hymn we sang right before the Gospel?
Did you notice that first stanza in particular? It goes like this:

“We know that Christ is raised and dies no more.
Embraced by death he broke its fearful hold;
and our despair he turned to blazing joy. Alleluia!”

And our despair Christ turned to blazing joy. Blazing joy. Alleluia.

I don't know about you, but BLAZING JOY makes me want to get up and dance!

After we have baptized **baby Jane Camp** in just a few minutes (later on at 9:30 this morning), I will lead us in a special prayer in the Prayer Book asking for the gifts of the Holy Spirit to fill Jane's life. That last of these petitions asks to give Jane “the gift of joy and wonder in all your works” (BCP, p. 310).

Have you known someone who actually lived their life with this gift of joy and wonder?

There is a story told about St. Francis of Assisi, the little Povorello.

It is said that one night he was walking through the streets of his hometown, the city of Assisi up in the hills of Umbria in Italy, when he noticed that the full moon was shining down with incredible brightness.

But what amazed St. Francis even more was that no one else in the city seemed to notice this at all! Everyone was going about their evening chores or whatever happened to demand their attention.

But no one paid any notice to this amazing moon!

So do you know what he did? It is said that Francis climbed up the steeple of the cathedral there on the central square in Assisi. He grabbed the rope – think of the hunchback of Notre Dame! – and he pulled it to ring that great big bell in the cathedral tower. That certainly got everyone's attention!

Now, understand that the bell was rung only to announce the start of the Eucharist or if there was vital news that needed to be announced, like an attack on the city or the death of the Pope. So on this night, when the bell was rung, the people ran out into the square, eager to hear the urgent news.

And there was the little St. Francis, small in stature but giant in soul and bright in face, leaning out a window high up on the steeple, pointing up at the moon and saying to the people: “Look, look! The moon is incredibly brilliant tonight!”

People thought he was mad. Crazy.

Kind of like David, leaping and dancing as the ark of the LORD was brought into the city. But was Francis crazy? Was David a bit loony?

Perhaps. But IF what we say about God is actually true – IF the kingdom of God is in fact the true reality and IF these little social games that we play here on earth are simply an illusion – IF God truly loves you and me (and baby Jane) more than you could possibly imagine, then why not celebrate and act a little crazy?

Those of us in this Episcopal Church are in for some craziness in the next 9 years, I think. Some of you know that our General Convention just met in Salt Lake City and that at that triennial meeting Michael Curry, the Bishop of North Carolina, was elected to serve as our Presiding Bishop for the next 9 years, beginning his term on All Saints’ Day.

A few years ago, Bishop Curry authored a well-received book called “Crazy Christians” and this is what he had to say:

“Forgive me for saying it this way, but Jesus was, and is, crazy! And those who would follow him, those who would be his disciples, those who would live as and be the people of the Way, are called to be exactly that – crazy. If you asked me what the Church needs today, I would say this: we need some crazy Christians!” (Crazy Christians: A Call to Follow Jesus, 2013, p.2).

My friends, crazy Christians are those who know that they have been redeemed, that the truth has set them free.

Once you drink deeply from the well of the love of God in Christ, then you know that this alone is real, and all of the other games we play among ourselves are silly illusions that distract us and dull our senses.

Once you have come to know by experience the fullness of God's love for you and for the world, then you come to realize that all of life is one big wedding feast.

Where we are supposed to eat and sing and dance, and not to care what others think.

"And our despair he turned to blazing joy. Alleluia." Amen.