

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Perfect Season: Dancing for God”
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Amos 5:21-24
Matthew 6:1-18

They are the four words that no contestant wants to hear. “You really entertained us.” On the surface those would appear to be a very positive expression of support. Yet on Dancing with the Stars they are the kiss of death. For those of you unfamiliar with Dancing with the Stars it is a show that pairs celebrities with professional dancers whose task it is to teach the celebrities how to dance. Sometimes they are successful, such as with Meryl Davis and unsuccessful as with Michael Bolton. Regardless when the judges say, “You entertained us”, what they actually mean is, you cannot dance worth beans. It means that you have no rhythm, no style and essentially that you are either walking or stomping through your routine. Though Cindy and I are not great dancers we are usually pretty accurate in being able to tell which contestants are dancing and which are simply going through the motions.

In some ways this is a perfect image for the life of faith. Some people dance before God and others simply go through the motions. When I say dance before God, what I mean is that God plays a tune of grace, love, forgiveness, compassion, justice and tender care for the world. God then calls us to dance to that tune. God calls us to allow that music to infect our souls and change us so that rather than dancing to the tunes which the world plays, we follow where God’s music leads. And just like any dance it is learned and practiced and we have those around us who will show us how to allow the music to guide and direct our lives. The issue for all of God’s people though is that we are tempted to quit dancing and simply go through the motions. It is often said that familiarity breeds contempt, but I believe familiarity breeds complacency. We become complacent and simply act. This is the complaint that Amos brought against the people of Israel. Even though they followed the sacrificial rituals, they were not dancing. They were not allowing justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. They were just going through the motions.

Jesus, I believe, was faced with the same issue; the people were tempted to simply go through the motions of faith. They knew what they were supposed to do. They were to give alms to the poor. They were to pray to God. They were to fast. These were Jewish religious practices that had been practiced for almost half a century. They were the hallmarks of Jewish life...and have become the hallmarks of our own spiritual lives. We are to give money to the church and to those who serve the needy. We are to pray continually. We are to occasionally fast in order to allow ourselves to focus on what really matters in life. The problem was that because these were practices with which the people had become overly familiar, the people had either ignored them or had come to use them in order to receive the approval of others. The people had ceased dancing and had returned to going through the motions, often, if you will, to entertain others rather than for dancing for God. Jesus then offers the people some techniques which would assist them in returning to the dance.

The first technique was to dance in secret. As a pastor, one of the things that I have noticed across the years is that when people are called upon to dance in public, here meaning let’s say, to pray, one of

two things often happen. One, these people become intimidated. There is a sense that only those of us who are professional prayers ought to talk to God. Two, people believe that they have to pray the whole Bible. They want to make sure that all of the bases are covered. Jesus gets this and so he tells the people that they are to remember that God is their only audience and so they can dance in secret. “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites (which as Joanne told us on Ash Wednesday) means actors, for they love to stand and pray on the street corners so that they may be seen by others. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your father who is in secret and your father who sees in secret will reward you.” What Jesus wanted them and wants us to understand is that we only dance for God and that it is much easier to do in secret than in public.

The second techniques is to keep our dance simple. On Dancing with Stars the concept is that as each week of the competition passes, the dances will become more and more difficult. There will be more difficult routines and techniques. Sometimes this is how we view our dancing before God; that we have to make it more and more difficult and if we do not, then we have somehow failed. Jesus however, urges us to keep it simple. “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” “But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face...” In other words keep it simple. As the Nike commercial says, just do it. We are not to worry about the perfection of our technique, but instead we are simply to dance for God.

The final technique is do dance sincerely. We are to dance from the heart. For many of us this is the most difficult technique. It is the most difficult because we live in a world of feelings. Loving others is about feelings. Forgiving is about feeling. Serving is about feeling. Society teaches us that in the end sincerity is not about what we do, or how we do it, or how often we do it, but only about how we feel when we do it. Jesus though makes no mention of feelings. Jesus asks people to give, to pray and to fast because they are the right things to do. They orient our hearts and minds toward God and others. They align us with the tune because they are mirrors of what God does for us. God gives to us, so we give to others. God listens to us, so we speak to God. God speaks to us, so we fast in order to hear what God is saying. These are the melodies of God’s song. Sincerity then does not mean that we have to feel a certain way about these actions, it merely means that we do them because we know that they will assist us in dancing for God; that if we are intentional about their effect they will allow us to become the dancers God desires us to be.

You and I are called to dance before God; to let the music of God’s love and grace infect our souls and change our lives; to guide all of our steps. The perfect season then is not to have others tells us what god dancers we are, but to have God reward us for keeping our dance secret, simple and sincere. The challenge that I want to offer on this day then is this, to ask yourselves, “How am I dancing before God? How am I allowing God’s tune to guide my life?”