

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Alive in a Global Uprising: One More Time ... From the Beginning
Rev. Dr. John Judson
Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017

Genesis 2:4-17; John 20:1-18

Cindy and I were going to show them how to do it. We were going to show everyone else how it was done. We were going to be the best dancers at Dancing with the Pa-stars. Now most of you have probably never heard of Dancing with the Pastors, and that's because it was a onetime event to raise money for Habitat for Humanity. Every year in San Antonio, the city-wide cluster of Presbyterian churches would hold some sort of event to raise funds for the house, and this year it was a dance-off between ministers and their spouses. And I knew that Cindy and I had it in the bag because we had a secret weapon. One of my church members was a retired professor of dance at Trinity University and the person who had taught me how to dance. So, I got in touch with Shirley, the retired professor, and she was thrilled to help us. We chose a waltz and got started. How shall I put this...hmm...the one phrase I almost got tired of hearing was, "John, that's not right, let's do it one more time...from the beginning" My frame wasn't right. My timing was off. I didn't have my head quite right. By the end I think Shirley wondered if she had ever taught me anything. The good news was that Cindy pulled us through...but if I had been a contestant on the real Dancing with the Stars, I might have been the first contestant sent home.

I have often wondered if God felt a little like Shirley; that all God wanted was for people to listen, take some instruction and follow God's choreography in the dance of creation; the dance of life. I realize that that might sound a bit odd, the dance of life, but I call it a dance because God is a God who invites us into a joy-filled and abundant life; a life that makes us want to dance and sing and celebrate. God is not a god of rigid rules and regulations, but of life fully embraced and we can see this in the creation story. God has made this amazing garden filled with all kinds of delights. It had plenty to sustain human beings. It is a place with only a single rule, let God do the choreography, and otherwise enjoy, live, love. That's all. Sure, the first man had to be the gardener, but nothing more. Care for creation. Enjoy creation. Yet, if we had finished this morning's Old testament story, we would find that human beings didn't want God to direct their dance. Instead they found a dance critic who told them that God could not get them to the top of the leader board, but that they could if they just did the dance they desired. The first humans listened to him and the results were not pretty; fear, shame, anger, blame, guilt.

We might assume that God would have turned to the heavenly judges and said something like, "Sure, those folks were just human beings, the beta version. I'll get started on human beings 2.0." But God doesn't. Even though God expels them from the garden, God tells them, let's do it one more time. Let's try the dance one more time. Unfortunately, as the story continues, humanities' willingness to dance the dance of life does not go so well. There is murder, violence and war. So again and again God finds new partners to train hoping that they can learn the dance of love, joy and hope, each time saying let's try this one more time. God finds Abraham and Sarah and says, come dance with me and together we will show the world the dance of blessing. It works for a while but ultimately the children of Abraham end up as slaves in Egypt. God finds Moses and says come dance with me and we will show my people the dance of freedom. The

people are set free but in the wilderness decide that they would rather listen to their Egyptian dance instructors. God finds Joshua and says come dance with me and together we will show the people the dance of having a place to call home. But when the people get to their new home, they decide the like the way the Canaanites dance and go with their choreography. God finds judges, prophets, and kings and says let's dance and show the people the dance of justice and compassion, yet few if any listen and learn. The results are war, violence, greed, excessive pride and a creation that looks nothing like the amazing garden that God had created in which God desired humanity to live. Let's do it one more time God, keeps saying ...

Ultimately, God decided to go with the adage, that if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself. So, God became one of us. In the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God became one of us, a human being. Rather than calling choreographers, Jesus showed us, in person, what the dance looked like. He led us in the dance of love, forgiveness, community, compassion and grace. He taught, he prayed, he healed, he led, he invited people to dance this amazing dance of God's creation. And they did, by the thousands...until they didn't. Then the world decided God's dance in Jesus was not for them. So, they arrested him, tried him, crucified him and buried him. This is where our story picks up. We find Mary coming to the tomb. She comes wondering if the dance of creation is done, afraid that there will never be one more time. Even after she encounters angelic beings in the tomb who tell her that Jesus is not there and that she needs to look elsewhere for him, she is still confused. So she comes back into the garden, where the tomb is located, and encounters someone she thinks is the gardener and asks him about Jesus.

What she is about to discover is that she is in no ordinary garden and that this is no ordinary gardener. As John tells the story, she has found herself in "the garden" with "the gardener", the new Adam, Jesus. She discovers that this moment is about more than the resurrection of her friend, it is God saying, "OK, one more time...from the beginning." This is not like all the other one more times. This is a radical new beginning for humanity and for all of creation. This is the gift of Jesus' resurrection.

This is one more time from the beginning because the power of sin has been broken, meaning that all human beings can now learn the dance of creation; the dance of life. The power of sin that causes us to let others and not God to choreograph our lives has been broken. The power of sin that causes us to stop dancing and start judging has been broken. The power of sin that causes us to stop dancing and to be angry, fearful and resentful has been broken. The power of sin that causes us to stop dancing and hoard rather than share has been broken. In the resurrection, we become people capable of once again enjoying the fullness of God's creation; enjoying the grace filled dance of love, hope and joy.

This is one more time from the beginning because the power of death has been broken, meaning we get to dance the dance of life forever. What this means for us is that we no longer must fear death. We no longer must live in its shadow. We can dance the dance of God's creation with joy and abandon because God is leading us in this life and the next. We can dance the dance of life with confidence because we know that the dance goes on.

On this Easter morning, then, I have one challenge for us all, and that is to ask ourselves this question, "How well am I dancing? How well am I allowing God to choreograph my life in such a way that my dance is Jesus' dance of love, grace and joy?"