

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Mighty Acts of God: Let’s Party”
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Exodus 5:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

It was the path to adultery, divorce, murder and little children left orphaned. It was the devil’s work and it had to be outlawed. And so in 1933, Anson, Texas outlawed dancing. I was made aware of this fact back in the late sixties when my family was making our annual pilgrimage from the heat of Houston to the cool of Estes Park, Colorado. Somewhere in deep west Texas we must have passed a sign for Anson, and my father said, Yep, no “dancin” in Anson.” Wanting to know more I asked and he explained that years before the city council had outlawed all public dances. So from then on, whenever we would drive past the turnoff to Anson, we would all say, no “dancin” in Anson. You may be asking yourselves this morning, what does no “dancin” in Anson have to do with Pharaoh and a parable about a party. The answer is that in each of our stories there was someone wanting to throw a party and someone trying to stop it.

The person in both the stories wanting to throw the party is God. As the Grateful Dead put it, “Then God way up in heaven, for whatever it was worth, thought he’d throw a big old party. Thought he call it planet earth.” That sentiment, that God was throwing a big old party is at the heart of the scriptures. It is a party of freedom, love, abundance and peace. The Old Testament describes it as the ability of persons to live freely under their own vine and fig tree, eating the produce of their hands. It is the ability of people to live in peace where the lion lays down with the lamb and swords are turned into plowshares. In the New Testament, we hear stories of a messianic banquet and of a new heaven and earth in which everyone will have enough and peace will reign. We see this in our Exodus text, where the people want to go to the wilderness to have a festival of celebration to their God; and to do so in freedom and peace. In Jesus’ parable, it is the king who is throwing the party of abundance, desiring that everyone attend and share in all that the king offers.

In our stories as well, as I said, are those who want to keep the party from happening. In the Exodus story, it is Pharaoh who wants to keep the party from happening. And he does so not only by refusing to allow the Hebrews to go a day’s journey to worship, but he makes their lives harder so that they will not ask again for freedom, abundance, love and community. In our parable it is, interestingly enough, those who are invited to the party who want it stopped. We see this in that rather than simply saying no to the invitation, they seize the slaves, mistreat and murder them. God wants a party of freedom, love, abundance and peace...and there are those who do not want anyone to attend. At this juncture, we have two choices as to where we go from here. We could focus on attempting to figure out why some people don’t want to get the party started and focus on “those people.” Or we could focus on our response to the invitation to the party; because we have been invited. For those of you who have been here a while, you know where we are going...we are going to see what should be our response to the invitation to the messianic party.

First, we are to show up. I have heard it said that half of being successful is simply showing up. And what showing up here means is showing up in the community in which the party is taking place. It is showing up in a community of freedom, love and abundance. I say this because, while we can encounter God on our own, you can’t really have a party of one. A party is a community event in which together people experience and share the abundance of love that God offers to the world. It is that banquet to which

people are invited by the king. There is no ordering out and home delivery. Granted, I know that I am, and I have always wanted to say this, preaching to the choir, because you all are here this morning. But it is a reminder that each of us adds to the party and the party adds something to us. So we are to show up to the party each and every week.

The second response is that we are to show up with arms wide open. Again, if we follow Jesus parable, we see that when those who ought to want to go to the party refuse, the King invites everyone from the highways and byways...and here is the kicker, both good and bad. In other words, everyone is invited. For first century Jews, this concept of inviting good and bad would have been shocking. It would have been shocking because the concept of God was that God only wanted to party with the good people; the proper people. But Jesus says otherwise. One of the realities of humanity is that we are tribal. By that I mean that we naturally gravitate toward people like ourselves. We have tribes based on the color of our skin. We have tribes based on our educational level. We have tribes based on how we felt about the outcome of last week's MSU-Michigan game. The party that God is throwing is to be an "un-tribe" party. It is one in which our arms are wide open inviting in everyone...and I mean everyone. We are called to help all people discover the joy of freedom, love, abundance and peace. We are to be a radically inclusive community.

The third and final response to the invitation is that we show up with arms wide open and appropriately dressed. Over the years as I have taught this parable, it is the end of the parable that causes much consternation. After all, why should someone who has accepted the invitation to the party be cast out simply because they are not appropriately dressed? First, let me be clear that this has nothing to do with what one wears to church. Second, what this does have to do with is the attitude one wears when one comes to the party. This idea would have been clearly understood within first century Judaism. When one came into the synagogue or the Temple, one went through a ritual bath, symbolizing that one was leaving the old behind and putting on the new so one was ready to be transformed by God. Wearing the appropriate attire here means that we come ready to be changed by the party and its host. We come ready to be new people capable of living into and offer up freedom, love abundance and peace.

Next week is pledge Sunday. On that day, we are asking all the members and friends of Everybody's Church, to make a financial commitment, not simply to keep the institution running, but to the party. For you see, when we make a financial commitment to First Church, we are making a commitment to keeping the party going. A party in which people find the freedom to become the people God wants them to be. A party where people find God's overwhelming love. A party where people share our abundance with others. A party where people find the peace of God in Jesus Christ. By pledging we participate in the great party of God's kingdom and keep it going for all who need to find the joy God offers.

So, what happened in Anson? Did they ever get to dance? The answer is yes. In 1987 the city council, against the wishes of the two largest churches in town, voted to allow dancing to return to the community. The first night, about 700 of the town's 2,600 residents turned out. The crowd included people in their 80s, parents with children in strollers, teens and everyone in between. Together they experienced the joy of the Texas twostep, the Cotton Eye Joe and the schottische. And the proceeds from their dances have gone to fund a new youth community center in the town.

The challenge for us is this, to ask ourselves, how am I helping to keep the party alive so that all people can discover the joy of freedom, love, abundance and peace that God has to offer?