

**“Dancing and Fasting with Jesus,” based on Matt. 11:16-19, 25-30,  
David Jahnke, 7/13/08**

Wisdom and dispassion were linked together long before the scientific method which put emotionless objectivity on a pedestal. Going all the way back to the Greeks and the Romans, reason has been linked to a paucity of emotion or at the least, greater control over emotions. And while emotions often can clutter up matters, Jesus tells us today that our feelings and expressions of joy and sorrow are critical to a full life in God’s Kingdom.

A member of my former church told me that what was lacking more than anything in the modern-day Presbyterian church was joy. She sensed that everything had become far too serious and that we had forgotten the lightness of life in Christ. Being yoked to Christ means bearing one another’s burdens but Christ says this burden is light. And he spent plenty of time enjoying life.

One of my first services at that church, the pastor spoke about joy and charisma in the church. Then during the hymn after the sermon-- which may have been the same one that we are doing today-- I was taken aback when the pastor put his arm out for me to join him in a square dance in the middle of worship! This was your typical gray-haired, black-robed generally solemn Presbyterian pastor hoping to dance a jig with his new associate. After my initial shock, I gladly joined him, naturally. And I thought, “There’s hope!” This particular sign of hope felt a bit awkward but it was hope nonetheless.

Jesus said, <sup>16</sup> "To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: <sup>17</sup> " 'We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.'

Friends, Jesus has a pipe in his hands and he is calling all who are willing to be child-like to join the dance. Now I am not going to ask you to do a square dance with your neighbor though anyone who is so inclined is welcome to. The reason for Jesus’ call to dance comes between musical interludes when Jesus sings, shouts and whispers, “God has forgiven you. God has forgiven all of you. God has forgiven everything bad that you have done and everything mean-spirited that you have said— and I mean everything. So come join the dance.”

I think that what keeps people from joining the dance; from experiencing true joy is the sense that I am not graceful enough, I am not funny enough; mostly I am not good enough. Look at what I have done in the past and what I keep doing.

A combination of what people have done and what the world has done to them convinces them that they are not really loved and that is the source of a joyful life—knowing that you are loved. Perhaps their parents did not join their joy or attend to their sorrow. But news that Our Father in heaven loves us so much that nothing can keep us from His eternal care— this should get us up on our feet. For those of us who believe this good news, every day can be an unabashed, unashamed celebration of God’s mercy— with families, friends...And I have got a secret...even at church.

I may have mentioned this but my mom has a favorite expression which we like to tease her about. Whenever we are out to eat or doing anything recreational, you can practically guarantee that you will hear mom say, “This is just like a party.” I’ve even heard her say this at an actual party. And you’re like, mom this is not LIKE a party, this *is* a party.

I do not know if my mom has ever said “This is just like a party” to her fellow choir members on Sunday mornings. But this is a perfect context for such an expression. Part of what my mom is getting at is that our attitude largely determines whether life is like a joyful party or not. My mom knows that family gatherings revolving around food and fun are cause for celebration. In the same way, the mercy and care of God are cause for a celebratory approach to life.

In the passage, the children who play and sing- who celebrate and mourn- they are identified with sinners whom Jesus partied with. They are perhaps a little childish in their emotionalism and their disobedience. But when John the Baptist tells them that they need to repent and be baptized, they understand and they respond. When Jesus tells them that God forgives them, food and drink and joyful praise burst forth.

And once the weary and burdened finally found some rest for their souls through news of forgiveness, then they were freed to learn from Jesus. And what Jesus wants to teach them is that the Kingdom of heaven is inside them and all around them. And while sin can never extinguish that Kingdom, it is always darkening the Kingdom and trying to convince us that it is not really there. So while we must never forget that eternity is at the core of everything, we also must admit that sin has made quite a mess of things! And this cannot be ignored or neglected; it is worthy of judgment and mourning.

When both Jesus and John the Baptist proclaimed and acted as if everyone needed a complete change of heart and mind, the wise and the learned thought that they were madmen. The wise were generally obedient, orderly, self-controlled people. And they felt no need to either mourn their sins or lavishly praise God for his mercy.

They certainly saw that everything was not perfect but thought “*We are* o.k. because 1. we are sufficiently righteous and/or 2. because we are Sons of Abraham. In other words, we are good enough and anyway, God has chosen us.

You may have heard that the humorous nickname for Presbyterians which is unfortunately apropos for today’s message. We are known as the “frozen chosen.” Chosen because we emphasize God’s grace in choosing humanity for salvation; frozen because of our discomfort with charismatic expressions of praise and general stiffness in worship.

We who are well-educated, sober-minded, morally upright have to hear a warning and a challenge from today’s passage. First off, there is no such thing as over-zealousness for the Lord’s ways and thoughts. This is what John the Baptist and devoted Christians today are accused of. There is always room for improvement in the spiritual life so we have to hear John the Baptist’s call to repentance and disciplined living. Prayer, fasting,

study, worship; these are life-long pursuits which gradually bring God's Kingdom to life in and around us.

Second, there is no such thing as foolish praise or excessive joyfulness, at least when it comes to celebrating the grace of God. This is another essential way of magnifying God's Kingdom and drawing others into it.

Do you remember what happens at the end of the children's fairy tale, The Pied Piper of Hamelin? It actually freaked me out a little the first time that I saw it. The piper had been promised a full bag of gold for getting rid of the rats. But when they give him just a coin, he says that the children of the village ought not to be raised by such cheats. So he plays his pipe again and all of the children dance their way out of the village, down the road, passing through a mountain into a Kingdom where the party never ends.

Children and the child-like hear Jesus' pipe. Children rejoice at the silliest of things and they also get deeply sad at hurtful things. And to whom do they turn? To their mother and father— and to their brothers and sisters. Children realize sub-consciously that they are yoked to their parents. They know their need for love and forgiveness. They long for a parent's attention. They want to learn and share joy. The Kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these. And while we will never be able to pay the piper his due, we still can hear the pipes and join the dance into God's Kingdom. To the God of all grace who calls us to eternal union with Christ; to God be the glory now and forevermore. And the people of God say...

