

Called to Dance and to Wail
Based on Matthew 11:16-30, David Jahnke, 7/9/17

Jesus and John the Baptist were in the business of moving people's hearts. John was deeply connected to all there was to mourn in this world. He wanted to connect others to the poor by living simply-- fasting and no special clothes. He called people into the water to have their hearts cleansed. Jesus was more aware of God's salvation of the poor and he celebrated this through having parties with them. Jesus knew how much there was to rejoice in and he thus lifted the poor from their burdens.

It seems a lot of people were not interested. Their lives were very hard. I mean we know how hard our lives can be so just imagine living in a time and a place without all of the prosperity, medicine and comfort of modern life. Imagine life being a daily struggle to just exist. Now many today still struggle and then and now, hard lives can lead to burdened and hard hearts. Although success and prosperity can as well.

We see both dynamics at work in the story of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. The wealthy and powerful Pharaoh's heart was hard and that kept the Israelites enslaved. But after being liberated the same problem happened to the Israelites. So Moses told them the following:

Circumcise your hard hearts, and stiffen your necks no longer. ¹⁷For the Lord your God executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and loves the aliens, providing them with food and clothing. ¹⁹You shall also love the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. ²⁰So worship the Lord your God. ²¹He is your praise. He has done for you these great things that your own eyes have seen. (Deut. 10)

Moses is here playing the role of both John the Baptist and Jesus in trying to move his people's hearts to both rejoicing in God and having compassion for hurting outsiders. But the Israelites had their own struggles and that became their lone focus. And when we focus on ourselves and, in particular, on our own struggles, worries, doubts and shame, we end up miserable and paralyzed.

So Jesus calls us to listen for the flute player in the distance and be drawn into the dance; and to listen to the person who is crying over great suffering or loss and to wail with them. He wants those of us who know His power and love and hope, to rejoice in these things daily; and to give our burdens over to Him. We know that God wants to take them. And when we do that by following Jesus' Way which teaches us how that happens, then we are freed to help others with their burdens.

Dance-wise-- what wonderful story is coming across your newsfeed and calling you to smile? What beautiful thing is on the horizon as you drive or take a walk-- calling you to pause and be in awe? Wailing wise- what sad news is calling you to connect, consider, and perhaps act? The Spirit is calling in these moments, wanting to fill you with joy and compassion and service.

I was talking last Saturday with our tenants who worship here. Watching these people and the Garden of Eden praise God is a thing of beauty. Their exuberance is a part of the dance that Jesus is referring to.

There were many more chairs set up in here for our service than they usually have and they talked about how they wished all the seats were filled! To which I gave a big Amen! And I added that all we can do is exude the joy and peace and love of Christ and hope that people will catch on.

And if not, we must not get down on ourselves! Many in Jesus' generation did not follow his joyful example. So we certainly should not be surprised or discouraged when our generation is no different. Instead we just keep following Jesus' example and give thanks that God has revealed His joy, compassion and wisdom to us and to so many others around us.

I want to just briefly go into what happens when people reject compassion or forget that real joy comes from a relationship with God. People become critics. Critics of themselves, their families, people around them. All you have to do is turn on your computer or your t.v. and you are bombarded with "experts" who know better than their opponents who are also "experts." And as they try to tear each other down, Jesus shakes the dust off of his feet, knowing that haters are gonna hate. That's what he did with those who demonized him and John.

And then he says that wisdom is vindicated by deeds, not words. Argument will convince noone. But deeds of love and mercy done with joy slowly vindicate us in others' minds because they go deeper than words. Loving deeds cut to people to the heart; they circumcise and soften them.

That happened to me last night as I watched a new movie called Lion about an Indian boy about 5 years old. He would help his mom with her job of carrying rocks. He helped his brother steal coal from the top of moving trains in order to sell it at the market and get some milk. One night, he accidentally fell asleep on a decommissioned train and ended up riding almost 1000 miles away from his home where they spoke a different language. After barely escaping the sex trade a couple of times, he scraped by until he ended up in an orphanage and was lucky enough to be adopted by an Australian couple. And years later, he eventually makes his way back home.

I have nothing special to add. What is there to add when people have this sort of suffering in their lives? I just ask you to ponder and mourn that for a moment. And I ask you to ponder and rejoice in all of the people out there who find it in their hearts to bring them joy and new life.

This was the wonderful and terrible thing God was bringing to my attention last night. What will He bring to yours in the days ahead? Will you ponder them and let them work their way into your heart and move you to compassion and joy? Will you then take your newfound knowledge and the joy or compassion it triggered in you and then act to make a difference? This is the pattern of life which will draw the long-suffering and the hard-hearted into the health and love of Jesus Christ.

As we move into responding to God's Word with the offering our lives and the gifts, I want to share the ending of a song I heard this week by a great Texas song-writer name Ray Wylie Hubbard. The song is about some of his struggles and joys and he concludes like this:

My ex and I had us a boy, he's 18 years old. Now, he's playing guitar
I don't know if he's gonna hang his life on it or not
But I'm very grateful for the time I get to share the stage with him

I'm grateful for the time I get to play with musicians
Like George Reiff and Rick Richards

I'm grateful that I get to write these old songs
And travel around the world and play them for people
And they come out and hear me play

And the days that I keep my gratitude
Higher than my expectations
Well, I have really good days ["Mother Blues," The Grifter's Hymnal]

I think Jesus' gratitude was always much higher than his expectations. And that led him to good day after good day. May we follow in Jesus' and Ray's footsteps as we give thanks for our families, our work and so much more. And through such overflowing gratitude, gladly offer our lives and our labor to the Lord. Let's start to do so by joyfully singing of all that Jesus does for us...