

## SERMON- Proper 11 (B)

Charles R. Cowherd

2 Samuel 7:1-14a

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Good Shepherd

July 18, 2021

—Psalm 23

### OPENING:

Last week, we heard the story of David dancing before the Lord in an unbridled physical celebration of David's relationship with God.

This week, we hear the flip side of that relationship with David's attempt to build a Temple for God.

It's human nature:

David realizes that the Israelites have a good thing going on with Yahweh, the next step is to bottle God up and make sure not to lose the pipeline.

David now wants to regulate and confine the divine.

To that effort, God replies:

“No thank you, actually. I never asked to be domesticated in a golden palace.

***Don't try to put me in a box.***”

This was all a dramatic shift for David—in the span of just two chapters in the Book of Samuel—he goes from being the “Dancing King” to wanting to institutionalize and control God.

I am not an expert on dance, by any stretch of the imagination, but this is like going: From Soul Train to the Lawrence Welk Show.

From Gene Kelly to “Head shoulders knees and toes.”

From Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers to the most rhythm-less couple at the local dancehall.

It's like David going from being Mikhail Baryshnikov to, well, Charles Cowherd.

### DANCING:

I am indeed no dancer, but I agree wholeheartedly with Christine's estimation of dance last week as an activity that somehow captures our ability to transcend this earthly life.

There is something about dance, its unfettered and joyous quality, that makes it something like an act of worship.

A story about a “dancer”:

many of you know the Keithly family,

whose parents are active in Good Shepherd Players, and whose son Ed grew up in this parish and now works for the Diocese in Richmond.

Ed was once interviewing for a job at Shrine Mont (the Diocese's Camp and Conference Center) as a counselor at one of the summer camps.

The interviewer, his would-be boss, asked him this question:

“What did you learn as a camper that might help you prepare for this job as a counselor?”

Ed said he thought for a minute, considering what answer to give, maybe something Biblical or explicitly spiritual.

He kept thinking and then finally said: “I learned how to dance.”

“I learned how to dance.”

He did NOT mean that he had learned how to dance technically or had taken classes in some way.

(I have seen Ed dance: his parents got the musical talent in the family.)

Instead, he meant that he had learned how to dance instinctually, without regard for self, but rather for the good of others, for the good of himself, and even for God's greater glory.

What Ed meant, I think, was that being able to dance, in some sense, meant not being afraid. It meant being willing to lose control, it meant being free, alive to God's presence in this world.

## **LITURGY**

Now I am too young to remember the “liturgical dance” craze of the 1970s.

Maybe some of you *do* recall, fondly or not, those attempts to incorporate dance as a form of artistic expression into formal worship.

You can still find examples of it online but, at seminary at least, liturgical dance was derided as the *worst* form of liturgical innovation.

And maybe that's for the best, that we don't tie dancing to the altar or to our “sacred spaces,” because dancing should reveal, instead, something about God unbound to the physical space of religion and outside the authority of the institution.

## **DAVID**

So back to David and our Old Testament reading, where the king has stopped hearing the music, and instead hears a song of control and of safe bets.

Again, it's understandable: the Israelites had been on the run, they had been moving from place to place, with the Ark of the Covenant residing in a mere tent. At a moment of triumph, it dawns on David that a tent is not good enough for God, that a more suitable and honorable dwelling spot is needed. Building a Temple would mean that communion with God could be normalized and centralized. So he would build it of CEDAR and it would all be perfect.

Now there is this website that I love called "McMansion Hell" and it's full of pictures and descriptions of the architectural wonder known as "McMansions." These are houses, common in parts of Northern Virginia (but *never* in Burke/Fairfax!) that are gigantic monstrosities, built on tiny lots, with lots of conflicting architectural styles that, when combined, are kind of grotesque.<sup>1</sup>

I bring that website up because the house that David wants to build for God of cedar "might today... be.... a McMansion of fake stone, with chandeliers, central air and cedar-scented room fresheners."<sup>2</sup>

That's where us 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans might prefer to put God. There God would be comfortable for us, in a secure and clean location but one that is totally antiseptic, with little life, and no dancing.

Eugene Peterson takes this idea to its conclusion: the "eventual consequence of that kind of life is death, for God will not be managed. God will not be put and kept in a box whether the 'box' is constructed of cedar or wood or hewn stone or brilliant ideas or fine feelings. We do not take care of God; he takes care of us."<sup>3</sup>

Our building materials and our dance routines are different from David's, but the questions remain:

How do I know God? How do I feel the Holy Spirit in my life? Where do we sometimes want to keep God?

Hear me, that this is not a "church buildings are bad" sermon. The only thing good about the last 16 months was the reminder how much we missed this space and the people because those are what point us to God.

Rather, God is saying to David—and to us—be careful about trying to control God, in whatever form that might take, and so by doing, diminish God.

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<sup>1</sup> [McMansion Hell](#)

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Norris, "Open Paths" *Christian Century* (December 13, 2005), pg. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene Peterson, "Why Did Uzzah Die? Why Did David Dance? 2 Samuel 6-7" *Crux* 31:3 (Sept. 1995), 5-7

David knew that, deep down—this is the slayer of Giants and the tamer of lions—he knew that the only way to really relate to God was to live one’s life fully, to sin boldly even, the only thing left to do was to dance.

## **CONCLUSION**

One final story: I was at Richardson Libby’s funeral earlier this month—Dick Libby was Roger Libby’s father, and an Episcopal priest who served here on occasion over the years. At the beginning of the funeral, the officiating priests announced that, since Dick had attended General Seminary in New York City—the great high church seminary in the Episcopal Church—as they had, that the service would include the High Church components of chanting and the *Sanctus* Bell, etc.

I did not go to General Seminary but, wow, being able to experience that great complex liturgical dance was beautiful and moving for me. Thank God for our buildings and thank God for all these complex rituals and movements that help us get to God, to show praise, to get out of our own skin, to dance at the Ark.

The most powerful moment in the service, for me, occurred during the instructions around Communion, when the priest talked about how people should physically come up. He said that if you wish to receive that you should put your hands out and make a “throne for Jesus.”

Normally, I think my Low Church radar would have gone off at such a phrase, but it was so moving at that moment, and again when reading our Old Testament lesson.

“A throne for Jesus”— we make a Temple when we receive Him with our fragile hands.

It’s a simple structure with a grace-filled movement, as we become Him by ingesting the bread.

We then are the physical dwelling place, the throne, as the Body of Christ.

It’s up to us, the sons of David, to build that Temple, with our selves, and to be the dancing hands and feet of Christ in this world.

That’s what God tells David in our passage,

God says I will build a house for YOU, the House of David, a royal house of your descendants, a long line of sinners and saints that will end with the Messiah, the Lord of the Dance.

**AMEN**