

“Divine Dance”

Psalm 97, John 17:20-26

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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Seventh Sunday of Easter

Back in my younger years, I had the wonderful opportunity to see Yul Brynner in a revival of *The King and I*, at London’s Palladium Theater. It was the culmination of my six-week, post-college EurRail journey with a friend. Brynner was playing opposite Virginia McKenna in the role of Anna and all of this came to mind as I read John’s rounding, circular and mystical prayer from today’s gospel. (Sometimes, I think John gets stuck on a gerbil wheel, but this time, I could feel the energy he is trying to convey.) The presence of the Spirit is implied as the lectionary is leading us toward Pentecost and Trinity Sunday.

This last Sunday in Eastertide is the invitation to a dance.

If you remember *The King and I* and its lovely settings and score, there is much grandeur and beauty but it is orderly and, in the way of Asian movement, it is for the most part subtle and controlled. Until after the ball when the King asks Anna about the intimacies of European dance and she begins to sing *Shall We Dance*; then two people take the entire stage with innocence and intimacy and an amazing athleticism – that changes everything/is transformational.

Each person of the Trinity is distinct and yet so united as to be one as Jesus says over and over again in our reading. The theological word used for the energy and presence of Trinity is *perichorisis* which is often translated as ‘dance.’ So I found myself wondering, if God is dance/sound/melody – what does God sound like?

So, (as one does at HOH) I asked Aaron, and he said he would write something ...

Aaron, what is the melody of God today?

What might Jesus’ melody be?

And Spirit?

So then Trinity sounds like ...

As Jesus said, “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us,” (17:21b). So, shall we dance?

We commonly talk about God in three persons yet our capacity to understand God intellectually is limited; there are ways to come to deeper knowing, even solid knowing like becoming aware of God in Nature, for example. Jesus is our most down to earth image; we see him in the stained glass or paintings all around this church or we can look in the mirror. The problem with this, is extending the human image and particularly the male image back on God – and then we begin to claim that our

visions are heavenly visions and our agendas/ideas are ordained. In spite of God's inscrutability, there are many people who claim to know exactly who God is and what God wants. Karl Barth talked about God not as persons but as "three modes of being" to try to push us out of what we think we know – because no matter what we think we do know of God, God is always bigger than that. So today, God is vibration. Fingers on keys, air through the pipes – sound and movement – God is always an invitation with the intent to move us.

This passage is invitation by way of intercession; Jesus as priest, the one who prays, goes to great lengths to help us know we are an integral part of the mystery of God. As music, we are invited into the vibration, rhythm, and movement whether through dance or giving words and voice.

Dance works so well because it moves us. We can grow from the couple on the stage to line dancing, circle dances – and square dancing – it turns out dancing comes in all shapes and sizes. I think it's part of the uplifting power of flash mobs and why we remember Gene Kelly and Donald O'Connor; or Baryshnikov and Misty Copeland – we want to enter into the dance, we want to enter into the inspired movement that so amazes us and touches us, that it carries us along. That is why we follow Jesus – but never Jesus alone – always Jesus in Trinitarian oneness. We follow Wholeness seeking wholeness; it is a completeness and unity so enlivening and fulfilling that we want it for our friends and neighbors. Whether on an actual dance floor, or in the concert hall, at table with friends, or walking down Summit Avenue, the Vibration is present.

So please allow me to suggest that the image and metaphor of Jesus' prayer can also grow. Miroslav Volf translates *perichoresis*, or the energy/vibration of the triune God as movement but not as dance per se, Volf interprets it as "making room," both are empowering. Through the prayer he prays before his arrest, Jesus makes room for us within God's sphere (which through John's image is more like an atom rather than our long held image of Trinity as two men and a bird); the unity we seek in life is first unity with God - this is called divinization – or perhaps more familiar to us in Paul's words "letting the same mind be in you that is in Christ Jesus." This is the Christian spiritual goal. We do this through practices like worship, Centering Prayer, Bible study, singing in the choir and in other ways letting God tune our hearts to God's pitch/vibration.

This past Wednesday, a small group of us went to Ujamaa Place for lunch. The name, Ujamaa comes from the Swahili meaning "extended family" or "cooperative economics." Both of these are signs of the earliest church. 41% of the Ujamaa men come from the foster care system, all come from experience with the penal system and need that sense of extended family to help overcome trauma, and other hardships, mistakes, and deficits from the past. They are actively and passionately seeking the movement that unity with God brings as Otis said over and over again, this is spiritual work. In Jesus prayer, he makes room for us in that atom and then charges us to make room for others.

In the phrase, “making room,” Volf suggests we engage God as our social program; Volf charges Christians to make our unity with God not only spiritual practice but also social practice. As Volf stated, “... I have argued that this divine welcome in Christ, which in the New Testament, is consistently and almost universally portrayed as the mode for Christians to emulate, translates into the claim that the will to give ourselves to others and welcome them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgement about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity” (Volf, “The Trinity Is Our Social Program”). This is what saves the world.

And that is the real and true strength of this House of Hope – our humanity; our strength is in the vulnerability we have shown one another in sharing our suffering. How many times have we have walked together through cancer and sometimes into remission and at other times through the dying process; when one among us dies or a family member is lost, we sit together in sorrow and loss and then encourage one another to tell the stories not knowing if that sharing will make us ache all over or laugh with renewal and hope. Our real unity and our real strength is accepting the love of God through this community – perhaps through a Stephen Minister or a Deacon contact as well as through friends, old and new. We are stronger because our Intercessors are praying for this church, its members, friends, and activities every single day. Our pilgrimage experiences have brought us closer to one another and to God and deepened our awareness of the vibration of God in in new landscapes. We grow in unity when we can trust our feelings of failure and loss with pastors and friends. When we actively listen to others giving them a chance to heal, we make room in our own heart and soul for the oneness of salvation.

But here is the list of the side-effects of glory, as one commentator wrote, “Jesus speaks in this passage of sharing his glory with his disciples. Yet as we look in John’s Gospel at the placement of this prayer, the final words between the account of the betrayal of Jesus, we remember that Christ’s glory is inseparable from Christ’s suffering and cross. The unity that Christ is invoking for his disciples may include the disciples’ cross. Unity with Christ throughout history has often meant suffering at the hands of unjust powers, for the sake of love and of integrity. Christ’s glory is not always the world’s glory. At the cross, it is a shattering reversal of all our conventional expectations of glory” (544).

So here is the final twist and shout for today, the shift from our subtle and controlled movements to the passion and athleticism of the dance that takes to the full stage: Ujamaa Place is making room for us; they who have a ministry of transforming lives as their mission are making room to dance with us for our transformation. We need them and they are renewing their invitation to dance with us.

The strength of these walls, our privileged location on Summit Avenue, along with our budget and endowment, our long history, numbers, and traditions are both a blessing and a spiritual challenge at

the same time. I love this sanctuary and the way I feel when I am here; I love how I feel among the unity and communion of each of you, this congregation! At the same time, this kind of stability can make it difficult to move and transform. So without an amen today, I invite us all back into the vibration that asks us to dance and make room for the tuning of heart and soul to God and God's mission.