

Tales for the Trails #4: **DANCING**

Matthew 22:1-14

We are living in a crazy world.

We use artificial flavors in lemonade and real lemons in furniture polish.

We call it a “Hot Water Heater” when it heats cold water.

We put “OFF” on a light switch you can't read in the dark.

We drive on parkways and park on driveways.

When we transport something by car, it's called a shipment.

When we transport something by ship, it's called cargo.

It's a crazy, mixed up world. Things aren't as they should be. We have war, death, illness, disappointment, and stress.

So what shall we talk about today? How about feasting and dancing?! Does that seem incongruous at best, or maybe even inappropriate? I may be a little “out of sync” occasionally, but it's not just me. Scripture is filled with surprises and mixed messages like that.

Take today's scripture--the fourth in our Tales for the Trails series on Jesus' parables. Weren't you just a little bit surprised, even turned off, when in this parable about a wedding banquet we read about the king sending his army to burn the city and destroy the people who didn't come?

Then when some poor guy who did come showed up dressed inappropriately, he was tied up and thrown into a really bad place. Not being a fashion role model myself, that's a little scary! Many times I've shown up at occasions either over or under dressed. Sounds like a real fun wedding! Something more than the surface incongruity must be going on here. There always is with Jesus and a parable.

When we looked at a similar parable in Luke a couple months ago I mentioned how “banquet” is the favorite biblical metaphor for God's Kingdom and that Jesus was a “diner out.” The first part of both parables is really an accusation of the Jews who rejected and killed the prophets who first brought God's invitation and then later, according to Luke's version of this parable, also killed the king's son, or Jesus. This particular parable tells us that being a part of God's Kingdom is to be as joyous as a wedding feast.

When the Jews, or the first invited guests, rejected God's invitation into the Kingdom through Jesus, it was extended to the outsiders, the Gentiles. That

would be you and me. He chose us! (as the choir just sang) But it's one of those "outsiders" who was inappropriately dressed and punished for it. Now, what's that all about? That's how this parable is different.

This man is at the wedding, but he's not celebrating. He has missed the point. He's the old grouch dragged to the party by his wife and whose expression and demeanor let everyone know he doesn't want to be there.

"How did you get in here?" the king asks. "If you insist on seeing this time with me as a drag, then you might as well go where people are burdened by joyless weeping and teeth gnashing." Talk about being "bounced" from a party!

So this man was not being judged for his clothes; he's being judged for the attitude his clothes represented. The man showed no respect or affection for the king or the occasion. But the point of the parable is not so much to promise us punishment as it is to emphasize what we will miss if we don't accept God's invitation and enjoy the experience once we're a part of it. The party will go on. It's our choice to join or not--like the prodigal son's older brother we talked about before.

If we Christians believe Jesus is the Messiah, the means of our forgiveness and eternal life, and if we believe God's grace is greater than any life circumstance, then why don't we look and act like it? Why are we so downcast and sad, so serious and intense? Nietzsche once said, "Christians ought to look more redeemed."

So, let me ask you: When was the last time you danced? In my mind, I see Snoopy, the Peanuts dog, smiling and twirling with complete abandon.

But I confess to you, I am NOT a good dancer. I love music, but the only parts of my body that move in rhythm are my fingers and vocal chords. I am reminded of the late Dr. Chuck Dodrill, former professor and head of the theater department at Otterbein College. When I was a student at Otterbein I played Frank Butler in the musical production of *Annie Get Your Gun*. I sang the songs, but the choreography was a lost cause. Chuck was my mentor and the director of that play. Finally, he jumped up on the stage, grabbed me by the shoulders and told me just to stand still and let everyone else dance around me. It worked!

So even if you're like me and won't be "dancing with the stars," when did you last feel that glorious freedom of expressing joy in some exuberant way? That's dancing, too. We recently received an e-mail from a friend whose son had just been told by his oncologist that his cancer had not returned, as he feared. Our friend wrote, "I could dance in the street, but I might make a spectacle of myself!" Dancing is a wonderful metaphor for Christian joy. The truth is, most of us don't "dance" very often. Why?

Because we're so caught up in our problems and obligations;

so busy being critical or cynical;

or so concerned about "doing it right," whatever "IT" is, that when we do "let go" or "lighten up," we feel guilty.

Jesus addressed this parable to the Pharisees. Pharisaism is not limited to 1st century Jews. It's an affliction distributed widely in human nature even today. If you look closely enough, there's something wrong with everything and everyone. And, there's always more to do. The lack of celebrating is the result of poor memory and poor vision.

When was the last time you meditated on all the gifts and good things that have happened in your life?

When did you last notice God's gifts of grace in nature, another person, or unexpected blessings?

I'm reminded of the old Jewish proverb that states, "In the judgment we will be held accountable for every blessing we refused to enjoy."

However, I hear someone say, "But wait, there's more! Life is not all blessings."

Some of you have read Scott Peck's book *The Road Less Traveled*. I believe the greatest impact that book has on people, including myself, comes from reading one short sentence on the first page. Peck writes this, "Life is difficult." It's a simple declarative statement. It doesn't say life is sometimes difficult for some people. It says life is difficult, period. Christians are not exempted.

How can someone who has suffered pain, loss, mistreatment, or disappointment look at life as a gift?

How can they celebrate when the joy has been crushed out of them?

I understand that. We all have experienced those times. We don't have to be dishonest about our feelings. If you feel life has been cruel then tell God your pain and frustration and ask for encouragement and strength to "keep on keeping on." But, don't park on your pain. Don't let it blind you to God's grace still in your life.

That's the trap. We let one negative fact or situation in our life dominate and define who we are.

The divorced or widowed are tempted to think that it measures the value of the rest of their lives.

People who have done something in the past they are not proud of fear that one fact determines their future.

People who are now "older" or have some liability, or a physical flaw, like the fire chief's nose in the movie, *Roxanne*, think that's all people see.

If we think and act that way, if we "give up" or "give in," we are saying "no" to the invitation to make our life a celebration. Jesus says, "It's not the circumstances or events of your life, but what I have done for you and am still doing for you that define who you are."

Recently, I was asked, "What does the Christian cross mean to you?" We all might have a little different answer, but after some thought I responded, "It says to me, the worst man could do was redirected to be the best God could do." That's why we Christians "celebrate" the sacrament of communion. We remember Jesus' death, but we're celebrating the resurrection and all that means for us, that **God always has the last word.**

So, everyone is invited to the celebration, and everyone has valid excuses not to come, but we get to choose. It's the inner spirit we maintain that matters most, how we choose to "dress" our minds. If we are filled with anger, bitterness, or resentment, if we insist on complaining and blaming God, things will get worse.

If we learn to refocus after pain--to have good memory and vision--we will see opportunities to dance, not because all things are good. They're not. We will celebrate because life--with all its blessings and heartaches--is not in the grasp of some capricious fate, but in the hands of a loving and faithful God.

If you haven't "danced" for a while, then try it—whatever that looks like or means for you, even if it's behind closed doors where no one can see. It may feel awkward, but in time it'll change your whole outlook on life. Too many of us go to the grave with our "music" still in us.

I want to close with some of the words to a song many of you may have heard a while back by Lee Ann Womack called, *I Hope You Dance*. It goes:

"I hope you never lose your sense of wonder,
You get your fill to eat but always keep that hunger.
May you never take one single breath for granted;

God forbid, love ever leave you empty handed.
I hope you still feel small when you stand beside the ocean.
Whenever one door closes I hope one more opens.
Promise me that you'll give faith a fighting chance.
And when you get the choice to sit it out or dance,
I hope you dance...I hope you dance."

In this crazy, mixed up world, life may not be the party we hoped for, but
God's love will never leave us empty handed.

So, while we're here — Shall we dance?