

“Divine Dance”

Trinity Sunday, May 30, 2010

A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden

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Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

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When I was in those early, awkward teenage years I remember having a desire to dance. I envied others who could dance and longed to be able to dance. I knew my mother loved dancing. She had told me stories about the ‘old days’ . . . about dances that she – as a young adult – and others would drive many miles to attend in a rural part of South Africa where she had grown up. My stepfather, Reg, recalled during a visit to South Africa in 2001 – the last visit when I would see him alive – how he had taken ballroom dancing lessons while he was serving in the army as a young man. I knew he was a good dancer, and had observed him and my mother dance at our weddings, and on other very rare and special occasions. They looked so good together on the dance floor. I have always admired people who can dance. I guess I have always secretly wanted to have the freedom and to experience the joy of dancing.

During the impressionable and insecure years of my adolescence, I found that there were many things that held me back from dancing: shyness, inhibition, self-consciousness, fear of making mistakes, ignorance about dance moves, and an anxiety that I just wouldn’t look “cool” on the dance floor . . . that I might, in fact, look awkward and hesitant.

In those days in South Africa the equivalent of the “Prom” night started to loom large before me. I had sleepless nights over it. Fortunately, the principal of our boy’s school and the principal of the neighboring Catholic girl’s school arranged dance lessons before the “Prom.” The seniors of both high schools got together for a series of ballroom dancing lessons. It certainly helped, but it never removed a fear of failure and inadequacy on the dance floor.

This continued until something wonderful happened in my life. I fell in love! I had found my life’s partner, and in that love relationship I discovered that I was perfectly at ease dancing. Carol and I spent many wonderful evenings dancing together, especially at restaurants in the Johannesburg area. Making all the right moves and looking good on the dance floor didn’t matter any more. We were having fun. Dancing was a way of expressing our love relationship. It was in finding a partner and having a sense of community as a couple that all shyness, inhibition, inadequacy, and fear of dancing were overcome.

Today is Trinity Sunday. It is one of the most challenging Sundays for a preacher in the Christian year. Each year I ask myself: “How will I present this mysterious and complicated doctrine of the Trinity to my hearers?” Whenever we are faced with profound and almost incredulous concepts about the nature of God, we are inclined to think in terms of analogies and symbols. It helps our minds to grasp the meaning of some profound truth a little better.

So I have chosen to use a dance analogy to describe the Trinity to you and I have entitled my sermon, “Divine Dance.” Three images of dance come to mind. The first is the **virtuoso dance** in which people are driven by the music to express their purpose. The virtuoso dance is the solo of a Barishnikov with astounding leaps and spins, or the flashing feet of a Broadway chorus line, or the gyrations of the rock dancer. I thought that perhaps this is how each of the three persons in the God-head danced out divine purpose: the Father so full of creative power that there was no alternative but to create; the Son who loved so completely that not even pain or death could stop the dance; and the Spirit who was driven by the purpose to enfold, support, comfort, and guide us into truth. I have been thinking about the solo virtuoso dance of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Stop for a moment and think about the virtuosity of God. As Father, God is a virtuoso Creator who danced through the chaos and nothingness of a great abyss to form universes, and galaxies, and planets, and who – at the peak of this performance of glory and love – breathed life into humankind. As Son, God is a virtuoso Redeemer who danced on a Friday when the sky turned black, and danced with the devil on his back until that performance reached its peak in the early dawn of Easter morn and resurrection glory. As Holy Spirit, God is a virtuoso Sustainer who danced to the accompaniment of wind and fire to release power to fall afresh on humankind to mold and to make, to fill and to use all God’s people in a new and lively way. Yes, the divine dance is a virtuoso dance in which God has leapt and spun and pirouetted – and even gyrated and rocked the universe – as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But then I began to consider a second divine dance that is taking place in the form of an **ensemble**. I picture the three virtuoso solo performances of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit woven together – like three distinct melodies interacting with one another in a trio ...responding to one another as great dance partners respond to one another in a perfect ensemble. No one of the three is more important, though all are essential to the dance. The apostle, writing in the fifth

chapter of the Letter to the Romans, reminds us of these three distinct but intertwined themes. It is as if the apostle is saying that our hope of sharing in the glory of God the Father, our justification by faith through our Lord Jesus Christ, and the pouring of God's love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit are the essentials for a perfect ensemble. (v. 1, 2b, 5). Without each virtuoso dancer – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – responding to one another in the rhythm and harmony of a love ensemble, there would be nothing for Christians to boast about. But as it is, Paul says, “we boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (v. 11).

Beyond the virtuoso dance, and the ensemble dance, there is a third dance form. It is common in all cultures around the world that find their strength in community. It is the **dance of a circle**. In the eighth century the last of the Greek Patriarchs of the Church, John of Damascus, wrote some deep theology, and part of what he is best known for was his explanation of the Trinity. He coined the phrase “*perichoresis*.” “*Peri*” means “around,” and “*Choresis*” means “movement” from which we get the word “Choreography.” John of Damascus said, “There is a divine dance that takes place in the center of God, where Father, Son, and Holy Spirit move around each other, serve each other, give themselves to each other, and each know their part and live it out as fully as possible.” This concept of *perichoresis* was soon translated into the phrase, “Divine Dance.”

Try to imagine this divine dance of God: that in the Trinity there is fluidity; there is movement; there is motion. Imagine the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit taking turns to lead the dance, and how amazing it is that none steps on the other's toes! Instead, they are so tightly connected that they are indeed one: like the best dancers on *Dancing with the Stars*, only infinitely more brilliant. Imagine how such dancing leads to deep, deep love...such a deep love that cannot be contained.

In this dance the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit dance together as Greek men dance the circle dance of life. Though an unbroken circle, it is one that is always open to others joining it. And here comes the beauty and the good news of the New Testament gospel: though an unbroken circle – Three-in-One and One-in-Three – it is a circle that is always open to others joining it. As the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit move in *virtuoso* step, as they bound in love and attentiveness – each acutely aware of the other two – the circle opens to welcome us as well. You and I are invited to join in this Divine Dance!

Afraid, inhibited, shy to dance with God? Not if you have found in God a loving partner in life. Not if you have said “yes” to God, as two lovers say “yes” to each other in the depths of their hearts, in the meeting of their minds, and in the releasing of their emotions. Dancing our life away with God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – surely that is what human life is all about! As we participate in this divine dance, driven by the music of God, we take up our own virtuosity to become who we were made to be. Through a choreography of discipline, devotion, and daring we find that our virtuosity is woven into the divine dance in which we are fully aware of God’s participation in our life and our participation in God’s life.

So where is this “Divine Dance” stuff leading? It leads us to consider that larger dance of life where we recognize our need, not only for God, but for one another, and open ourselves to others to be able to live in sympathetic, serving choreography with them. As that happens, we find ourselves enfolded in the dance of God, living as God created us to live in fellowship with one another: loving, caring, nurturing, and sustaining each other in the dance of life.

If we have not stepped into the circle dance before, now is the time to accept the invitation to the dance of life that God so desires for us. Now is the time to put our busyness aside and to rekindle our relationship with God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Now is the time to dance with our Divine Partner, to let God take the lead in our lives, and to enjoy the true delight and source of life that God is for us. The opportunity for a vibrant inner and outer life waits for us if we are willing to risk the divine dance floor.

I leave you with the wise words of one who accepted the invitation and danced with God in a wonderful way – Julian of Norwich. Julian, probably a Benedictine nun and mystic who lived in fourteenth century Britain, experienced God in a powerful way. She wrote about her experience in her *Revelations of Divine Love*, saying: “We are enclosed in the Father, and we are enclosed in the Son, and we are enclosed in the Holy Spirit. And the Father is enclosed in us, and the Son is enclosed in us, and the Holy Spirit is enclosed in us: All Mightiness, All Wisdom, All Goodness, one God, one Lord.” Elsewhere she records that the Lord Jesus spoke to her and said, “All shall be well. And all manners of things shall be well.” How true that all will be well when all people – including you and me – accept the invitation to the Divine Dance!

Now one last thought: In speaking of the Trinity, there always comes a point when words

fail us. According to tradition, Saint Augustine was walking along the beach one day, puzzling over the doctrine of the Trinity, when he came across a little child who was running back and forth with a bucket, pouring water from the ocean into a hole he had dug in the sand. Augustine asked the boy, “What are you doing?” The boy replied, “I’m trying to put the ocean into this hole.” Augustine abruptly realized that he had been trying to put an infinite God into his finite mind. So let’s allow the rest of our reflection this morning to be in that place beyond words, imagining that joyful dance and our part in it, in gratitude to the God who invites us into a circle dance to be enclosed with the *virtuoso* God, and to be enclosed with one another.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.