

“David danced”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Psalm 100 and 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12-19*

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

When was the last time you were truly joyful? It might have been just this morning, as you sipped a cup of hot coffee and listened to the birds, or as you came to this place of God and love. Or maybe you can't remember the last time you felt joy.

Whenever it was, how did you express your joy?

Did you dance? I know, I know. We're Presbyterian. So, no, you probably did not dance. But maybe we should. Dance, that is.

I sent out some dance videos earlier this week. Some of you may have watched them. The first was one of 465 versions of the same video of the same guys dancing to a different song every day. Two men in the UK took this recording of these old guys shuffling at a bluegrass fiddler convention and set it to all kinds of songs: Diana Ross, the Bee Gees, Rihanna, DMX, Alice Cooper, Outkast, even the Star Wars theme song. It's hilarious, and awesome, and some of these videos have been viewed upwards of 100,000 times. There's just something so joyful about these old guys dancing.

Then there are the videos that went viral a decade ago of this guy—Matt Harding—doing this simple, sort of goofy, dorky dance all over the world. The video splices together scenes of Matt doing this same jig in India, Ireland, Australia, Kuwait, Mexico, Madagascar, Japan, Germany, Zambia, and dozens of other countries. First he's dancing alone, but then people start to join him, and they're dancing too, and they're laughing and falling over each other, and the kids have this huge smile on their faces, and some are teaching Matt their countries' traditional dances. He dances in the demilitarized zone of Korea. He dances with a whale in Tonga, and a seal in San Diego. In Bhutan, children do somersaults and headstands. There's ballroom dancing in Vienna, and cheerleaders in Pennsylvania, and firefighters in Texas, and dancers in wheelchairs in Oakland, and children juggling in Afghanistan, and ballet in Serbia, and even the crew of the aircraft carrier the USS Abraham Lincoln. More than 70 million people have watched these videos of a divided world brought together by dance... by joy.

If you watched the last video, you may have caught a glimpse of me dancing (badly) in a flashmob at the Presbyterian Mission Agency back in 2012. Flashmobs were this big phenomenon awhile back, where people would just burst into song and dance in public and then disperse. Just to give people joy.

And then there was David. It's this really beautiful verse buried in our story today: “David danced.” David recovered the Ark of the Covenant, the box that held the Ten Commandments and crossed a wilderness to get to the Promised Land. David brought the ark to his new city,

Jerusalem. And as he did so, we are told that “David danced before the Lord with all his might.” He danced with everything he had. He stripped off his clothes, wearing only a small cloth, practically naked. People were shouting, singing songs, banging tambourines, and blowing trumpets. And suddenly “all the house of Israel were dancing before the Lord.”

Everyone, except Michal. The Bible says that she looked out her window and saw David leaping and dancing, and “she despised him in her heart.” She told David that he had debased himself; his dancing wasn’t dignified. And to be fair, she had other reasons to judge David: she was the daughter of Saul, whom David had replaced as king, and who had recently died. And she was married to David (awkward!), but David had taken some... other wives. In fact, there’s a lot of complicated stuff going on in this story.

Life is complicated, right? It’s hard. And it’d be easy to say that things as frivolous as joy or dancing don’t belong. Maybe we’ve had those moments too, despising someone else’s joy—maybe even despising our own.

What’s harder than crying in public? Rejoicing in public! If I asked you to throw caution to the wind and start dancing (don’t worry, I’m not going to)... well... I don’t even want to imagine what you’d do to me. We are not exactly an expressive lot. My wife Jenna wonders: did being Presbyterian make us like this, or did we serious non-dancers all somehow find each other and become Presbyterian? Chicken and the egg!

I get it. I was the kid hugging the wall at every dance I went to. We feel self-conscious; we worry about people judging us; we’d rather think and talk. Dancing like David requires letting go of control, being vulnerable, being exposed... and that’s scary.

I wonder, though: What are we missing out on? Jesus tells us that he came to give us joy, that we might live abundantly.

Joy isn’t just another feeling. It’s not just happiness, when something makes you feel good. Joy is existential. Joy is the experience of being present with God. David danced because God was with him. That is the symbolism of the Ark. Suddenly he didn’t need dignity, or even clothes apparently, because he had God. God filled his universe, and so he danced. “You show me the path of life,” sings David in Psalm 16. “In your presence there is fullness of joy.”

Joy is when we let down our defenses (our worries, our seriousness, our ego, our fears, our hates, our control, even our reason... all the things that Michal was holding onto when she looked upon David from behind her walls). Joy is when we open ourselves to God, and God fills us.

This means that the principal definition of joy isn’t feeling happy; it’s letting go and letting God. Joy is fully inhabiting your present moment, your present body, your present being, as holy. Grief therefore can be joyful when it makes us present with God and with the one we love. Anger can be joyful when it directs us to justice. Contemplation can be joyful when it concentrates our mind on a single thought or moment. The Bible says that we can have joy even in times of trial and suffering (Matt 5:11-12, James 1:2-3).

Joy can be quiet or exuberant; alone or together; thoughtful or silly. But it is always vulnerable, real, uninhibited, passionate, entire. It is the giving of ourselves to God, fully, and not worrying what others think. It is dancing like David. Professor Amy Oden says it is “a spiritual nakedness that strips away illusions and constructs, leaving us more radically aware that everything is more mysterious and expansive than we thought.”

When I picture joy, I imagine whirling dervishes, dressed in white flowing gowns, spinning round and round. These Sufi Muslims practice whirling as a kind of prayer and worship. By spinning their bodies in circles, set to music, they focus their minds on God, and leave behind all ego. Their arms are open, with the right hand lifted upward to receive God’s love and the left lowered to the earth, to pass on God’s love to others.

Worship should be whirling dervishes. Worship should be David dancing. Worship should be the psalmist singing. Worship should be the prophet speaking freedom. Worship should be Jesus transfigured and washing feet. Worship should be the Samaritan woman running to tell her people. Worship should be... joy. And not just worship, but life... our work, our relationships, our grief, our happiness.

Why? Because God is here. Not a theory, not an idea, but a love that surrounds you, enfolds you, and fills you. A love that would lift you and make you dance, if you’d let it. If you’d just open your eyes and see it.

All this time we devote to worry and stress and the wrong priorities and even this safe worship... when we could be dancing with God.

How will you express joy this week? How will you worship differently? How will you live differently? How will you love differently?

Not because life is simple, or even happy, but because God is here. And that’s something that should make us all want to dance. **Amen.**