

**July 9, 2023**  
**“Dancing and Mourning”**  
**Song of Songs 2:8-13 / Matthew 11:16-19, 28-30**  
**Pastor Tim**

I am not preaching on the Song of Songs – or the Song of Solomon, as it's also known. But I want to say a quick word about it since it doesn't come up often in the Lectionary cycles. We don't get to hear this poetry very often.

It's a short book, only eight chapters, and it's been understood in very different ways. In traditional Jewish and Christian circles, it's understood as religious allegory representing – in Jewish context, God's love for Israel and the history of their covenant relationship with God; and in Christian context, Christ's love for the church. Which is why it made the cut to be included in the Biblical canon.

But at its heart it is secular love poetry. An expression of love between an unmarried heterosexual couple – as one commentary puts it, expression including their “longings, joys and pains as well as their fascination with the new experience of love.”

It is sensual and erotic at times, which is of course striking as sacred scripture. But most notable is that the love portrayed is profoundly and consistently mutual, with both lovers consistently expressing the same level of passion and intensity for each other as beloveds.

There's no indication that the author means to depict anything other than human, sexual love, but regardless, it's easy to see their love for each other as an expression or reflection of Divine love. Within the covenantal relationship, God's desire for mutual and egalitarian love – love between God and God's people, and love between God's people.

If you haven't before, I encourage you to read through it some time. I'll leave it at that for now.

Onto the text from Matthew's gospel. Well, eventually.

I am not a dancer ... but I love to dance. At least in certain contexts – weddings especially. And to be clear, wedding receptions.

I don't know what it is about weddings exactly, except I guess the collective gathering – at least in most cases – of pure and unadulterated joy. Feeding off the joy expressed by the couple.

I was a quiet kid, and for the most part, am a pretty quiet adult. Introverts, we're called, which is so much better than the debilitating "shy" label.

Beginning in middle school, the dance floor was about as far from my comfort zone as I could get. At an age when I – like most of us – was already as far from my comfort zone as I could get.

But I somehow powered through enough to show up at our school dances. As I recall, never dancing to anything but slow songs. If someone happened to ask me to dance. I did not do any asking. I spent most of my time sipping soda on the sidelines.

But something shifted at a wedding. To be honest, I don't remember whose wedding it was or even how old I was. Maybe high school, maybe a little older?

But I was surprisingly transformed. My personality, my fragile sense of self, suddenly found its footing on the dance floor. Of all places.

I somehow let go of the crippling self-consciousness that plagued me most of my life, and still does at times, and just danced. I felt free like I almost never did anywhere else. Dancing became for me an expression of unadulterated joy. And it has continued to be that for me, at wedding after wedding – including my own!

I do not claim to have any moves. I really don't have any moves. But what I do have on the wedding dance floor, and occasionally on other dance floors, is spirit. I dance my heart out. I work up a good sweat. I jump around. I feel like Snoopy tip-toe dancing and swirling across the yard.

It makes me think of the “Directions for Singing” offered up by none other than John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. Directions you can find at the very start of our red hymn books.

Direction number IV: “Sing lustily and with good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sung the songs of Satan.”

Wesley was intense, but the point is well taken – along with the other directions. Who cares if you can't really sing, if you don't have a particularly good or strong voice. Sing anyway. Lustily and with good courage.

Dance anyway, lustily and with good courage.

Because we are all meant to sing! And we are all meant to dance! But not just on the dance floor.

Which brings us, finally, to Matthew.

Verses 28-30 tend to get all the attention, and for good reason. They are the Greek scripture equivalent of Psalm 23. Comfort like a pillow. And here, Jesus is the pillow.

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Ahhhh ...

But in reading and reflecting on the text this week, I found myself drawn more to the earlier verses – specifically verse 17: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.'

Jesus puts the words into the mouths of children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to each other, perhaps for no other reason than to assert the wisdom of children. As he

will say elsewhere, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs?"

Indeed!

In any case, the "we" is functionally Jesus and John the Baptist, as Jesus makes clear in the verses that follow: "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man (the Son of Woman, as our translation asserts) came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'"

In other words, we came pointing you to the Way of the Spirit, the Way of Love, the Way of Life, full and abundant life, but you got stuck.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law got stuck in the Law itself. In the letter of the law. Rules. Appearances. Unable to see the Spirit, hear the Spirit – and so unable, ultimately, to dance and to mourn.

'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.'

Rules and appearances may be obstacles for the rest of us, but there are so many others. Worldly obstacles, distractions, detours, that can get in the way of the Spirit's flow:

Self-consciousness. Self-absorption. Self-reliance. Fear. Pride. Envy. Depression. Pain. Disease. Materialism. Greed. Status. Poverty. Hunger. Violence. Injustice. That list goes on and on, some obstacles experienced within and some without, but ALL making it hard for us to HEAR the music. To HEAR the wailing. Within AND around us.

Dancing and mourning, in my reading, represent the bookends of our shared human experience. The great, unadulterated joy that moves our bodies to dance when the rhythm gets us, and the great ache and despair of grief that shuts us down when we suffer loss.

I hear Jesus' call as a call to strip ourselves and to help strip each other of all that gets in the way of the Spirit's flow. In the way of Divine love. All that gets in the way of abundant life, live lived fully between and within the poles of pure joy and profound pain. Dancing and mourning.

All that clouds our vision and distorts our hearing, all that keeps us from living and experiencing ourselves and each other as God's beloved, belonging to God and to each other, worthy of love.

That's why Jesus says his yoke is easy and his burden light. To willingly take on the yoke of love is to release ourselves from the burdens of everything that gets in the way of love. Losing our lives in order to gain them.

Steve Garnaas-Holmes notes the double meaning that the English language gives us – “my burden is LIGHT,” meaning both the load is not heavy and ‘what I bear is pure light’ – as in bearing the light of God.

“What an easy burden,” he suggests, “to bear the light of God!”

We are made by Love, in Love, for Love, to bear the light of God, and so to take on the yoke is to submit ourselves to the Way of Love. To attune our spirits to that which matters most deeply, to that which is ultimately light-giving, life-giving.

To attune our ears more fully to the music AND to the mourning.

We are made to celebrate, fully, our joys. And to celebrate, fully, each other's joys as if they were our own.

And likewise, we are made to feel, fully, our losses. And to feel, as fully as we can, each other's losses.

We don't, most of us, deal well with our losses. We avoid the full intensity of them, whatever they may be – loss of loved ones, loss of job or home or relationship, loss of hopes and dreams, loss of agency, loss of belonging, loss of ability, loss of identity, loss of meaning and purpose.

We keep our losses contained. We avoid vulnerability and nakedness. We resist help. We move on, as best we can.

But abundant life comes only when we feel what we feel, fully. FULLY. And we all know its opposite: life stifled, life violated, life destroyed. The pain we end up inflicting on each other and even on the earth itself, typically comes out of our brokenness. Unresolved grief, where wailing was never fully expressed and mourning never fully felt.

That's a fact.

"True healing," writes Henri Nouwen, author of the "The Wounded Healer" among many other books, "begins at the moment we face the reality of our losses and let go of the illusions of control. Since we are such fearful people, this is our hardest challenge: to go beyond our fears and to trust that our losses liberate us from the bonds that hold us captive. We can't do this by relying solely on our intellectual and emotional abilities. Everything in us protests against dying — in whatever form it presents itself to us. ... But the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of love, is given to us to reach out beyond our fears and embrace the reality of our losses."

"This," he suggests, "is what mourning is all about: having the courage to allow our pain to be felt, and having the freedom to cry in anguish or scream in protest over our losses, and so to risk being led into an inner space that is very unfamiliar to us."

We can't mourn, or "sing the song of mourning," as Nouwen describes it, if we don't hear the wailing within us, around us. If we don't give it the space it needs. And that space requires community. We cannot mourn alone. We are not meant to.

I can't help but quote Nouwen again: "Healing begins not where pain is taken away, but where it can be shared and seen as part of a larger pain. ... Healing begins with taking our pain out of its diabolic isolation and seeing that what we suffer we suffer in communion with all of humanity, yes, all of creation ..."

And he goes on: "Mourning calls us not only to embrace, but also to welcome our losses as ways of following more radically the voice of love. ... Mourning makes us poor, creates inner emptiness, brings us to our nothingness."

And it is in that nothingness, he argues, sounding very Buddhist, that we are opened up to love and new life. Full and abundant life. With nothing to inhibit us, nothing to get in the way, we are freed to better hear the flute playing in the background. Freed to join the dance of life.

More from Nouwen, because it's such good stuff: "As we create the space to mourn, we discover in the midst of our grief that the same Spirit who calls us to mourn stirs us to make the first movement in our dance with God. The mystery of the dance is that its movements are discovered in the mourning. The dance does not simply follow the grief; it finds its origin in the grieving itself."

He calls grieving the basis for the choreography. That, friends, is a paradigm shift.

"Jesus," he asserts, "enters into our sadness, takes us by the hand, pulls us gently up to where we can stand, and invites us to dance. And as we dance, we realize that we don't have to stay on the little spot of our grief, but can step beyond it into unknown, spacious territory until we finally know that all the world is our dance floor."

In this way, dancing and mourning are two sides of the same movement. The movement of life itself, the movement toward God's love. Opening ourselves more fully to love and therefore to life more full and abundant.

Nouwen tells the story of a friend who went to visit his father, suffering from Alzheimer's. When he arrived he found his father anxious and agitated, so decided to take him for a drive.

They were gone for an hour or two and barely said a word to each other, but the friend noticed that his father seemed less anxious and agitated.

And then the father turned to his son and said, "Well, we haven't had such a good visit in a long time."

Nouwens's takeaway? "Anguish had become peace; sadness had become gladness; loss had become gain; mourning had become dancing."

'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.'

Dancing and mourning. Mourning and dancing. The very dance of life itself.

Let's dance, shall we?

May it be so.