

A different kind of dance

All Saints Sunday 2018

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

- Matthew 5:1-12

Within the past two weeks, many faithful Jews celebrated an annual autumn festival known as Simchat Torah. It always features a traditional scripture reading from the very end of the Book of Deuteronomy, bringing to an end a congregation's year-long journey through the Torah, the Five Books of Moses--the first five books of what we commonly call the Old Testament. Later in the Simchat Torah rites, the first portion of the creation passage from the Book of Genesis is also read. And so, the annual cycle begins all over again.

Simchat Torah often includes singing and dancing, particularly for Hasidic Jews, including those in a well-known congregation in Sudbury, Massachusetts, an affluent suburb of Boston. The rabbi there once wrote about the dancing on Simchat Torah: "*It's a thrilling sight. People come from far and wide. The dancing goes on for hours.*"

That same rabbi also recalls a Simchat Torah in the 1980s, attended by a Soviet Jewish *refusenik*, newly immigrated. When asked how he liked the dancing at the Sudbury synagogue, the man said it was "*fine, but better in Leningrad.*" Hearing this, the rabbi felt '*curious and a little insulted.*' How could the dancing in Leningrad be better than *this*?

The *refusenik* said, "*In Leningrad, if you dance in front of the synagogue on Simchat Torah, you must assume that the secret police will photograph everyone. This means that you will be identified ... sooner or later your employer will [know]. And since such a dance is considered anti-Soviet, you must be prepared to lose your job! And so you see to dance [in Leningrad] is a different kind of dance.*"¹

You and I have recently learned that synagogues in America can be as dangerous for worshipers as those in Russia under the Soviets or anywhere in the world. The same is lately and alarmingly true of churches and mosques. Many places of worship not struck by violence are nonetheless torn by conflicts about values or forms of worship or the future of the church. Religious institutions also now contend with widespread and sometimes well-deserved apathy and suspicion.

Considering all of this: what might *a different kind of dance* look like in our own time and place and circumstances? And, looking back to other times and places and circumstances on this All

Saints Sunday, I wonder if we might say that all of the saints whom we celebrate today are those holy ones who often danced *a different kind of dance*.

It may be natural and fun for many to dance when others are dancing and to learn and share the same dance that all are dancing. But to dance alone, as the saints often do, or to be ridiculed for your own new dance step, or to dance when others are outlawing dancing ... *this is a different kind of dance*.

It may be gratifying to dance when one's party wins the White House and controls Congress. Yes! I *am* going political on you on this Sunday before midterm elections! We must not forget the saints who earned their halos for wading into contentious earthly issues. Those saints also belong to and ultimately make reference to a heavenly kingdom. So whatever the election outcome, and even in the midst of so much earthly sorrow and corruption and unabashed cynicism, the saint remembers and continues to *dance a different kind of dance*.

Many of us happily show up for the dance when it thrills, when the religious meaning inspires us. But when things become perilous or polarized or tedious or unpopular most of us stop dancing and opt out or run for our lives. That's the very moment when a saint-in-the-making shows up to dance *a different sort of dance*: in Leningrad, or Pittsburg, or Lakeland, Florida, or at the US-Mexico border, or in the angst and nuances of the #MeToo movement or an opioid epidemic, or in the tragedy of some private sorrow or impossible decision or broken relationship.

Today's appointed gospel from Matthew does not give us a compelling image of what we Christians call the communion of saints. We don't see in it the *great multitude that no one could count* so beautifully rendered in today's reading from Revelation (7:2-4,9-17). The passage from Matthew mainly appears to be a litany of spiritual values and commitments that Jesus particularly commends. Perhaps we read this litany today, in part, to be reminded, as the diversity of saints reminds us, that there are many different ways to dance the different kind of dance.

St. Francis and St. Clare, for instance, have shown many of us and the world what it genuinely means to be '*poor in spirit*,' *not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly*.²

St. Julian of Norwich or St. Benedict or our sainted grandmother or godfather or Sunday School teacher may have shown us and the world by their examples and by their perseverance what it means to *hunger and thirst for righteousness*.

St. Oscar Romero, martyred Salvadoran bishop recently canonized in the Roman church, and Sojourner Truth, the fiery, black, female preacher of the 19th century now in our own Episcopal calendar, gave us and all the world examples of being *persecuted for righteousness' sake*, and by their examples they invite us to be courageous, to be undeterred in confronting hypocrisy and injustice, and, when all around have succumbed to fear or pretension, to continue showing up, to continue *dancing a different kind of dance*.

A bumper sticker that was popular a number of years ago said: "SPEAK THE TRUTH, EVEN IF YOUR VOICE SHAKES." A paraphrase and an invitation to us on this All Saints Sunday may be: GET OUT AND DANCE, EVEN IF YOUR LEGS ARE WOBBLY, even if no one joins you, even if it costs you dearly. Dance a different sort of dance for the sake of God, for the sake of good, for the sake of what is just and right, for the sake of peace, for the sake of hope. Who knows? In doing so you or I may well find ourselves, sooner or later, in the company of the *saints in light*.³ Amen +

¹ The story is told in, and quotations are taken from, *For the Time Being*, Annie Dillard, Vintage Books, 2010.

² The line is from the Collect for Proper 20, Book of Common Prayer, p. 234

