

**“A Time and Place for Celebration”**

**2 Samuel 6:1–19**

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I have a personal challenge with the texts for today, especially the reading from 2 Samuel. Part of the problem is that I am terrible dancer and thus, while David’s dancing before the ark holds up a wonderful example of how dancing can be an act of worship — a claim I strongly affirm — it also reminds me of my inadequacy. But another part of the problem is tied to my study of this passage in seminary.

The Old Testament intro class was taught by Dr. Page Kelley. He and Vernice were members at the church I served at the time, Broadway Baptist Church, in Louisville, Kentucky. They were later part of the church I served in Richmond, Virginia too. Vernice knitted a hat and gloves for Ian when he was born. Dr. Kelley had a tradition of having students stand and respond to questions about the readings. We knew trustees were coming on a certain day, and because he knew me well, I just had this sense that Dr. Kelley would call on me that day.

The day arrived, and sure enough, Dr. Kelley asked me to stand. He asked me questions about that day’s readings. I was prepared and ripped off answers like I had known this material all my life. But as I started to sit down, feeling pretty good about myself, Dr. Kelley did something he had not done before — he asked questions about a previous lesson I had not read as carefully, a story about David dancing before the ark. I couldn’t phone a friend, but people sitting nearby whispered helpful words, and I survived the moment with my dignity intact. I will never forget this story and I will always feel anxious when I hear it.

And yet, it is a magnificent story with many fascinating insights, including one that seems quite helpful at this time in our shared life — there is a time and place for celebration.

The Israelites have been through a number of challenges. In the first chapter of this book, David offers lament for Saul and Jonathan, both of whom have died in battle against the Philistines. In our reading, as David is having the ark brought to Jerusalem, while leading the whole nation in a parade, singing and dancing, one of Abinadab's sons who are driving the cart carrying the ark, Uzzah, reaches out to stabilize the ark and is struck dead on the spot, very much like the evil Nazis in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Even when they finally bring the ark into the city, one of David's wives, Michal, looks at him and despises him in her heart.

So, they have had their ups and downs, David has his own share of struggles, but now they are bringing the ark, a symbol of God's holy presence and a reminder of all that God has done for them in past, into the great city of Jerusalem which David wants to make the center not only of political and military life but religious life as well. It is an occasion for joyful celebration! After all they have been through, they are ready to cut loose and shout!

So there is singing and dancing with all instruments available being played. There is even a sacred meal at the end of the worship time with everyone being given a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins — more than we will have today! And the text says that David dances “with all his might.” This is not a slow dance, a bear hug or waltz. This is not highly restrained liturgical dance, though it is an act of worship. It is advanced contemporary dance — for the time — with grand jetes and pirouettes and wild expressions of joy! God is with us and for us, David and others proclaim, how can we not celebrate?!

The message for us is that there is a time and place for celebration. Not all of life is one big happy-clappy moment. There is also a time for lament, as David knows full well, and thus a need to be sensitive to those who are struggling at any given time. But there is a time to recognize the goodness of God and the wonder of life and thus express gratitude and joy. In many ways this seems to be such a time for us.

We have lived with the burdens and restrictions of a pandemic for a year and a half. We have experienced deep unrest at the persistence of racial inequality and endured over a year of understandable protests right

at our doorstep. We have lived through one of the most divisive political periods in our nation's history. And it is not that any of these matters is completely resolved. But many of us are able to be together again in this worship space, we are facing racial injustices more directly, and there is some light on the political horizon if not complete clarity about a better way for the future. Do we not feel like kicking up our heels and cutting loose?! There will always be challenges, but there is cause for joy, we are ready to celebrate, and it is okay to do so!

This may seem obvious, but the church has often frowned on celebration. The church has often painted a picture of a God who is opposed to anything that might even look like fun, a picture of a serious God who expects the faithful to be serious all the time. It is the theme of Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose* which was later made into a film. It is a historical murder mystery set in a fourteen-century monastery. It is difficult to say much without giving away the whole story, but the underlying problem is that a monk uncovers a teaching of Aristotle which speaks of the virtues of laughter... God forbid!

Well, I pray that God has a sense of humor. I believe that laughter is not only okay but also therapeutic. And I trust that there is a time and place for joy and celebration in life and in the context of Christian faith. For in theatrical terms, our central story is a comedy, not a tragedy. The Son of Man is put to death, but then raised to new life! Hallelujah! Right? The story has a happy ending, the happiest, and thus it is okay to remember it with joy. But not only is this not our first instinct, far too often joy is deemed to be inappropriate in sacred space, especially at this ritual meal we share today.

I remember hearing a story about a time when the founder of Jews for Jesus, Moishe Rosen, was first exploring Christianity. He visited a church and had a good experience, but he heard people talking about the fact that they would celebrate communion the next week. He asked what that was and they told him it was a great celebration like Passover. So, thinking of that great feast, he fasted and went to church famished.

But when he walked into the sanctuary, he thought he had made a mistake. There was a covered table in the front, perhaps it was a casket,

maybe this was a funeral. Then, a number of men in dark suits walked down front and he thought — it must be a funeral. But then they passed out tiny pieces of bread and a thimbleful of juice. Further confused, Rosen observed, “My, my, and you think we Jews are stingy!”

To be clear, it’s not just that the elements themselves are stingy, and even stingier during COVID — we can all agree that these packets, while safe, make our normal elements seem magnificent! But our whole experience can feel restricted. Some observances of communion are and should be heavy and reflective, for example, on Maundy Thursday. As we ponder the depth of God’s love and sense God’s nearness, while remembering other sacred meals we have shared with loved ones no longer present, we are often moved to tears. While not joyful, these experiences are deeply meaningful, sacred.

But some observances feel more routine and perfunctory, which should never be the case, and many people just assume that communion must always be somber. This simply is not so. Communion makes as much sense on Easter Sunday as it does on Maundy Thursday. In this meal we proclaim Christ’s death *and* resurrection!

As the Choral Response to the Gospel declares — goodness is stronger than evil; love is stronger than hate; light is stronger than darkness; victory is ours through him who loved us. Lest we think these affirmations sound superficial, we need only note that they are written by Desmond Tutu in the context of South Africa’s long and difficult journey. Even in the context of great suffering, Tutu proclaims, “Goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate.”

There is a time and place for celebration, and this seems to be such a time and place. So, as we come to this table today, we sing a hymn that is new for us, one that has a different spirit, intentionally so. We sing, “Let us talents and tongues employ, reaching out with a shout of joy; bread is broken, the wine is poured, Christ is spoken and seen and heard. Jesus lives again, earth can breathe again, pass the Word around: loaves abound!” It almost makes you want to stand up and dance, like David, in gratitude to God and with joy that cannot be contained.