

# Dancing On the Sly

“Don’t lose heart.”

**2 Corinthians 4:16-18**

*First in the series: Living the Dance (living through trials)*

Rev. John H. Hice

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First United Methodist Church of Royal Oak, Michigan

## Caught

I broke into pastoral ministry at a good time. Just out of seminary and into my first venture as an associate pastor in Kalamazoo, a church member told me a story about a pastor they had in the ‘40’s. Expectations had been different then.

She said that one night a church member went to the parsonage, sneaking in the bushes by the living room window. It was an opportune time. The pastor and his wife had turned on the record player and were dancing in the living room, arms around each other.

It was a scandal. Of course, no one questioned what the member was doing in the parsonage bushes. The scandal was all about the pastor and the pastor’s wife caught in the act of dancing.

It was difficult for me to imagine how this could be an issue. In seminary we had long discussions about whether pastors should be held to higher standards in regard to smoking and drinking. Dancing simply wasn’t an issue. I remembered my Associate Pastor dancing ballroom style with his fiancée at my youth group parties; I wondered why in this church at that time it would’ve caused such a fuss.

But evidently, it was a scandal. One that the pastor couldn’t recover from: it drove him right out of the ministry.

Why should dancing be regarded a sin? I’m not referring only to the kind you do chin-to-chin. But even as metaphor, why prohibit living life like a dance?

Dancing is free expression. It is movement that wells up from the spirit and, in sheer liberty, takes the hand of life itself to be its partner.

How wrong is it to rise in the morning and raise your hands to the sun and twirl for the sheer joy of life? Even to do that in your inner spirit? Yet, illness and grief tell you to get real and cut it out. The weight of guilt wants to keep your feet from moving. The

truth about suffering, both personal and global works to drain energy to dance like that right out of your spirit. Sometimes even rules tell you just to get in line. Don't move your feet. Don't let your spirit dance.

Sometimes you get the idea that if you're going to dance at all; it's going to have to be on the sly.

### **Dwelling with Suffering**

Now it's Lent, after all. It doesn't appear to be a good time to dance.

It was enough for the world to experience the devastation of Port au Prince. We hadn't fully realized the magnitude of suffering in Christchurch after its earthquake when news Friday morning reached us about another massive earthquake and tsunami in Japan.

It was powerful enough to move the coastline of Japan by eight feet and shifted the earth's axis by four inches. It's killed thousands of people, generated a tsunami that formed 30-foot walls of water sweeping across rice fields and whole towns, reaching up to six miles inland along the east coast of Japan.<sup>1</sup>

Lesser disasters than this have prompted some to its end of the world. It might feel that way. It might seem like God has decided not to dance with us any more – either personally or globally. After all, how can you dance at times like this when the very floor is moving?

That's the question. It's the same question that appears in the stories some of us have been reading this week in our Lenten study. The author tells of a church that didn't allow dancing, so his family danced at home – on the sly, it seems. He tells of a time when the English didn't allow the Scottish to play their pipes and another when Native Americans were not allowed to dance because it was considered an act of treason. He speaks of a friend whose death made it seem like God had not been faithful.<sup>2</sup> How can you dance at a time like that, when it feels like the life has been sucked right out of you?

The title of the study is *Hard to Dance with the Devil on Your Back*. It is hard. It's hard when the world is facing something as cataclysmic as we face today in the East; and it's also hard when you're weighted down with personal sadness or guilt or a load of oppressive rules. Burdens like these want to make your feet stop. They want to deaden your spirit. They want you to put life on hold.

This is the reality Paul addressed in the passage you just heard.

He was one who'd already seen his share of hardships. Paul knew, sometimes it can appear that there's nothing to be hopeful about. Once he had to escape from a town by night because of his preaching: his friends lowered him down the city walls in a basket to keep him from being lynched.<sup>3</sup> He'd been through storms at sea, and riots in the streets, and even verbal assaults in the church. For the love of Christ, he knew about the devil on the back and reasons *not* to dance.

It was another one of those times that he wrote these words to a church that had its share of bickering and character assassinations. In fact, he had become one of the targets: some were saying that his very hardships were evidence that he was not a credible leader.

People in the bushes: ready to run him out.

And this was his answer. On the outside earthquakes will come; the earth can move – violently – under your feet; you can face insult and injury, illness and grief. You might even be told not to dance. But that's just the way it looks on the outside.

Looks can be deceiving. In fact, Paul said that afflictions are really a part of a life of faith. They are bound to come, part of the reality of life; and maybe those who choose to dance the dance of faith are going to face even more than their fair share. Sometimes afflictions actually become signposts that the faithful are on the right path.<sup>4</sup>

What's happening on the outside is not your means of measurement. What's on the inside is what counts. What's on the outside is momentary. What's on the inside can be eternal. He says:

These hard times are small potatoes compared to the coming good times, the lavish celebration prepared for us. There's far more here than meets the eye. The things we see now are here today, gone tomorrow. But the things we can't see now will last forever.<sup>5</sup>

Paul's advice would be to keep on dancing. Dance on the sly if you have to, but don't stop living and believing and loving with a heart filled with joy. There's more to life than even the most devastating of devastations.

I've discovered an understanding of this through my journey with Laura after her cancer diagnosis. Serious illnesses had mostly, until then, belonged to people I served

and hopefully helped in ministry. I had become familiar with suffering *through others*. To be sure, I had tasted grief of my own. Yet the experience of care-giving still renders a pastor or even a health care professional more of a visitor than a resident in such suffering.

So, Laura's sudden plunge into serious illness introduced me to a new side of life. Together, we came to dwell with the diagnosis. Rather than coming for a visit and leaving for the next appointment 20-minutes-to-an-hour later, I became a *companion* through Laura's surgery, and chemotherapy, and recovery.

Unexpectedly, this taught me a thing or two about the purpose of Lent.

There is a difference between visiting Jesus' torture and death and living through them *with him*. Jesus' *visitor* is one who might drop by from time to time. To a *visitor* Jesus' words may be welcomed advice. His compassion might be appreciated. *The visitor* might see the Pharisees' mockery and feel a sense of indignation. *The visitor* can stop by Golgotha: cry at the injustice; and shake at the sight of the brutality.

I have *visited* the Cross. Perhaps, so have you. But have you *lived* it? Have you become Jesus' companion; dwelt with him there?

Did you dance there?

Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."<sup>6</sup>

Though he appreciates visitors, his call is for something more. It's for you to do more than come and sit for a spell only to be off to something else too soon. He expects disciples who will take up residence in his life: sacrificially follow him everywhere he goes. He calls you to reach to heal another with the compassion of God; and declare with him that God's love is here. This is what he means when he tells you to pick up your cross and follow.

Your cross is Jesus' cross: it's dancing with Jesus and sacrificing with Jesus so God's Kingdom happens in a world that really hasn't requested it.

Jesus said, "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."<sup>7</sup>

Dwell with Jesus.

Maybe picking up your cross in a world of earthquakes, disappointment and sin

is what it means to dance.

### **Dancing Anyway**

The author of our study told how his family danced at home though his church discouraged it; the Scots carried a piece of tartan between their thumbs and forefingers; Native Americans waited and taught each other to remember their dance. And he believed God was faithful to his friend in death as God was faithful to her in life. The devil might have been on each of their backs; but because of God's faithfulness, they could still dance.

He said that discipleship does not mean you are called to glorify pain; but it *is* bearing and fighting suffering in our lives and in the world.<sup>8</sup>

So you probably know: that those who dance that way will not be the ones who respond to this earthquake by a constant questioning of cosmic justice or obsessing on the notion that it's a sign of the end of the world.

The dancers will be the ones who simply respond with compassion and sacrifice so that relief will be given to those who need it most.

Our author reminds us:

Here it is, laid out before us. ...events may weigh us down..., but the dancing is not gone, nor is the creative force that leads it. Dancing, after all, is not only a physical activity. It is an act of spirit and the Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

What happens to you matters. No one is taking that away. But in the end, what counts is not what appears on the outside, momentary and limited in power.

The inward appearance matters most.

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Voigt, "Quake moved Japan coast 8 feet; shifted Earth's axis" *CNN*, March 12, 2011.

<http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/asiapcf/03/12/japan.earthquake.tsunami.earth/index.html?hpt=T1>

<sup>2</sup> Ray Buckley, *Hard to Dance with the Devil on Your Back*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, © 2010. pp 11-18.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 9:23-25.

<sup>4</sup> J. Paul Sampley, "The Second Letter to the Corinthians," *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press © 2000. p 83.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:17-18, *The Message*.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 8:34.

<sup>7</sup> Mark 8:35.

<sup>8</sup> Op. cit., Buckley, p 17

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p13.