

Slow Dance

“Instead of retaliation, healing.”

Matthew 12:15-24

Third in the series: Living the Dance (living through trials)

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When the Dance Cannot be Fast

It wasn't the same as getting into a roller coaster. No apprehensive fear of bodily harm. A man with a chin beard and straw hat opened the back door and showed us into the black buggy. He drew a chain across the opening before closing the door. He winked, "That's the safety belt." Then he climbed in front, clicked his tongue, and with a snap of the reins we were off. Slowly.

It's a different view of the landscape you'd get if you were on wheels yet not going 50 mph or whatever it is you go. Once you get over your edge of impatience, you can look through the rectangular windows carved in the buggy's side like picture frames and see the warm, almost still-life Pennsylvania hills beg for planting.

We climbed up the road bed and onto the highway shoulder.

This was my usual picture of the Amish. My dad's older first Cousin Sheriff would call it *the horse with the buggy-behind* (a play on words). You're out on a back country highway where you shouldn't be surprised to see such people. They're always on the side of the road, driving their horse; an iridescent orange triangle posted on the backboard; and you have to slow down. Give them a wide berth.

A curious obstacle: and now that's what we were.

Our driver was not the stereotype of the *shy* man in 19th Century black clothes. Those *were* his clothes; but he was talkative, informative, sometimes given to kidding around.

He looked both directions: front-and-back; and pulled the buggy up to the center of the lane, stopping the horse and reaching back to a switch box that was mounted up on the buggy wall. He threw a toggle switch, grunted an *Ah! Not again!* then pounded it two or three times with the fat of his fist. I think I heard it begin an intermittent click. *Turn-signal.*

Just then a couple cars came from behind, kind of fast. They slowed quickly to almost a halt when the first one accelerated again, lurching to the right shoulder, spraying gravel and bottle-caps behind as he shot around.

My first feeling was one of utter vulnerability, then a little outrage. *What right?* I watched to see what the horse would do, and the driver. Surely, something like this should spook them both. But it did not. Neither of them appeared to even notice. Then I realized: exposure like that is for them an on-going condition. For the rest of the world their dance is ever-too slow.

Concentration

The wronged – people dancing slow-enough to become easy targets. The author of our Lenten study tells their stories: his own disabled foster brother; a girl in a story who was constantly belittled by the people who were supposed to love her; a man who didn't fit the friendship matrix of a church ignored, finally, to absence – then was blamed for it; and an Amish community whose children were killed by a man who snapped and also killed himself.¹

The wronged: people who are different enough or weak enough – dancing slow enough to be caught by the reach of cruelty. Truth be told, the world is filled with them.

Truth be told, one time or another we, each of us, *are* them.

Once in a while every one of us ventures into the buggy, don't we?

So, if dancing is movement that wells up from the spirit and, in sheer liberty, takes the hand of life itself to be its partner; if it's rising in the morning to raise your hands toward the sun and twirl for the sheer joy of life even it's done only in your inner spirit; if dancing is living: how do you dance when you're wronged? How do you dance with someone else who is wronged when dancing with them will do you in?

How do you dance with the devil on your back? ...Jesus danced.

*(He) danced on the sabbath when (he) cured the lame,
The holy people said it was a shame;
They whipped and they stripped and they hung (him) high;
And they left (him) there on a cross to die.²*

But he danced.

The story goes that Jesus was already marked because he healed on the sabbath, a violation of the Law of Israel. He was “in the buggy”: not only because of the people he was with, but for the timing of his caring. So bad it was that they were figuring out a way to stop him once-and-for-all: find a way to capture him and put him to death.

This, now, is his response. He moves on; he withdraws. But that does not mean he went and hid. It simply means that he did not do battle with them. He did not call them names or come after them in a counter-attack. He simply responds to their threat by going back to the wronged to work his work of healing – *still on the sabbath*. This may well be the first act of non-violent civil disobedience. And it becomes the very picture of God’s response to human violence.³ **He will not retaliate.** He just gets in the buggy – with them.

No flood. No flash of fire. Only single-minded devotion to those who hurt: he’s bent on redeeming the lost and restoring the broken to wholeness – dancing real slow with them.

You know and I know that this will ultimately lead to the Cross; but still, nothing will stop him. And when it does come down to the Cross and Jesus lays his life on the line for all he’s done and all he’s done it for: the Cross is where the violence ends.

All the violence you and I endure, everything you or I inflict on others, even stuff so impossible it seems we can’t find our way out – everything: it all becomes subjected to the power of God’s incredible, invincible love unleashed at Jesus’ cross. Nothing will stop him. This is the place you and your victim and your enemy may all go to be reconciled with God.

From that garbage heap outside Jerusalem they called Golgotha, where they hoisted Jesus on the cross to die has come power to change the world.

Consider this. During my sabbatical I discovered transforming connections refashioning the world after God’s justice and reconciling love from the Cross to our doorstep. Despite time, culture, and doctrine Jesus was a profound influence on the Indian leader for independence, Mahatma Gandhi who applied the principles of non-violent civil disobedience and freed a people from its colonial yoke. That, in turn, inspired and taught Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., a young Civil Rights activist to apply the same principles for the liberty of millions of African Americans. God’s justice again was done for the healing of a nation. In turn King inspired Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela to lead the non-violent uprising that brought God’s justice and

reconciliation to South Africa; and from there the banner has been taken to Rwanda and Northern Ireland and even Palestine and Israel.

At each turn, violence and the potential for violence was overcome by a more powerful love. Cycles of retribution were replaced with acts of restoration. All born from the Cross.

And all-the-while the same, focused work of Jesus has worked to heal fractured marriages and friendships; and mend broken lives.

The Different Future

I like what our author, Ray Buckley, says about Amish theology. He teaches it right after he tells the story about what they did after their children were shot. It was an immediate response – within hours an Amish neighbor visited the widow of the gunman, giving her comfort. He said that for almost an hour an Amish man held the shooter's sobbing father who was overcome with grief. Members of the Amish community continued to bring that family food and comfort; thirty of them attended his funeral and invited his widow to attend the funeral of one of the children. They refused to think evil of the one who had afflicted such harm.

In the face of their own profound tragedy: as though they knew what it was like to ride in the buggy.

Buckley teaches that the Amish believe *“the lack of vengeance does not undo the incredible wrong or exonerate the evil; instead it is the making of a conscious, deliberate step toward changing the future.”*⁴

Changing the future: that's what the reconciling Cross of Jesus is all about. May that be your focus. The slow, vulnerable dance we do when we are wronged or when wrong happens to another needs to have that focus. The same focus as Jesus'...

Who saw everything in light of the Cross.

...and changed everything by his undistracted love.

¹ Ray Buckley, *Hard to Dance with the Devil on Your Back*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, © 2010. pp 27-34.

² Sydney Carter, *Lord of the Dance*, 1963. Published in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, Rueben P. Job, Chair of The Hymnal Revision Committee. Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House ©1989. p 261.

³ M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew”, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press © 1995. p 280.

⁴ Op cit Buckley pp 32-33.