

## **Grand March**

**“You don’t need to be strong. You just need to be faithful.”**

**2 Corinthians 4:7-12**

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

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April 17, 2011

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### **At a Liberian Bash**

Dinner was over and dishes were cleared. Conversations were subdued by louder music. And the great ballroom grew darker. It was clearly time for the dance.

I was a guest, one of the few who were American-born at this Liberian Reunion banquet, present for the price of an opening prayer. Dear friends sat across the table, Julia reached over the table to touch my hand: “This is the Grand March,” she said. Her husband, then in his rather youthful late-70’s, grinned. “You need to dance!”

I shook my head. “How do I get myself into these situations?” I thought. I listened as the music became a West African song with something of a calypso beat. Couples paired up and joined a growing line that began to snake across the floor; everyone moving in movements that were free and graceful and expressive of the music.

They were good; and I knew without trying that I was not.

So I made my excuses – Laura was not there and it was growing late on a Saturday evening and I needed to leave soon. But the truer truth of it was that I was not good at this. I’d get on the floor and would be exposed as the dancer I am: mechanical, two left feet, unable to move with the musical grace of the rest.

When it came to dancing a Grand March Dance,  
I would be kind of a crack pot.

### **March of the Clay Jars**

Which is not the way you would describe Jesus. Ever. But especially on this day when he had his disciples go and get a young colt of a donkey and he led them along the road that leads to the City gates.

This is the very picture the prophets had in mind for the Messiah: mounted not on a war horse but on a beast that symbolized peace. The Prince of Peace: riding, marching his way into the City with the confidence of a rising monarch about to be crowned Lord

of All. The people waved their branches. They shouted their loud *Hosanna's* and *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*

And you'd never know by the looks of it that this strong man dancing, marching down the road, heralded *Son of David*...would be crucified by the end of the week.

Like fine ceramic smashed. Betrayed by one of his own; arrested and mocked; scourged and hung until dead: Jesus was a vessel who would turn out to be the most vulnerable of all.

Here's a question for you...When Jesus marched his Grand March into the streets of Jerusalem and then marched his way out of the City to the hill called Golgotha: was he a vessel still held in the Potter's hands?

Did Jesus still carry God's grace?

It seems that the going opinion has always been that the proof of a person is strength and success. A coach is considered a good coach if he can put together a winning team. Three losing seasons in a row and he's out. Right? If the economy goes sour, unseat the President. If the company can't turn a profit, can the CEO. If the kids do poorly on the MEAP, the teacher ought to lose tenure.

So how can you blame the members of the Corinthian Church when they saw Paul's afflictions and wondered? He might have been the leader who started their church, but he was persecuted, often sick, most likely nearsighted, arrested and thrown in jail, shipwrecked: Paul was no stranger to bad luck.

It was like he just couldn't dance.

How could they trust the message of a guy who went through all that? It just doesn't make sense in the eyes of the world.

But Paul said that seems to be the point. The things he went through proved that he was weak. But, he said, people were rescued through his work in spite of it. In fact, his brokenness turned out to be the way some amazing things took place. Then he said all this pointed to the real truth: that it was God at work and not just him.<sup>1</sup>

He was like a clay pot, full of cracks. But still in the hands of God the Potter, he said it was really ok that he was sometimes weak and sometimes suffered and sometimes

didn't have it all together. The point was that he was made to carry the grace. And if he had a crack or two, God's grace would leak out for their benefit and for the good of God's work in the world.

I don't know about you, but I find that encouraging.

God can do amazing things through you before you get your act together. If you try and fail God might do a greater work than if you accomplished what you set out to do.

You don't have to be strong. You just need to be faithful. Because God can take even your greatest failure and turn it into a blessing. God can take your greatest hurt and use it to change a tide.

On May 3, 1980, 13 year old Cari Lightner was walking to church for a carnival when a car driven by a man who was under the influence of alcohol swerved out of control, hit and killed her. It turned out that the driver was a repeat offender and after being convicted received another very light sentence. Her mother, Candy Lightner, turned her outrage and unimaginable grief to doing something about changing the laws of the country for the health and safety of others.<sup>2</sup> She founded *Mothers Against Drunk Driving* and inspired laws that were enacted across the states.

Her brokenness became an occasion to make a difference. She said, "You don't need to be an expert on your subject matter, but you do need to be honest. I was not an expert on drunk driving in the beginning, but I was certainly knowledgeable about being a victim of drunk driving."<sup>3</sup>

Ray Buckley says, "Sometimes lives are damaged in the hands of the Potter... (But) the Potter does not cause the vessel to break...That is the promise of God. We will know suffering. We will know spiritual and personal failure. Our lives and the lives of those we love may crumble. We may become new vessels several times in our lives..."<sup>4</sup>

I imagine the stories you might bring this morning. You might be carrying the burden that comes from a health crisis or a struggle at work. You might hurt because of a relationship that isn't right. We all plenty reason for discouragement. And they might be good reason for holding back and even giving up. They might be good reason to stay out of the dance.

But what about Paul who was frequently down but not out? What about Jesus?

## The March Gets Grand

The Grand March from Liberia expresses dignity and African self-esteem.<sup>5</sup> It starts with the music as a few dancers pair up with one couple leading other couples follow, one pair after another. They dance in file around the room around people who haven't yet joined them and other obstacles, adding more and more couples: all who move with the music with a great deal of joy in a growing, long snake. In the end, everybody dances.

Not me. Can't dance. Had to go.

I moved slowly through the crowd and paused by the doorway to watch a few moments before leaving. That's when I was approached by someone I'm certain was sent by my friends. She smiled at me and held out her hand...took mine firmly...and pulled.

Dancing. I tried real hard to move like others did. Then following around the room in the movement of the march I finally just gave myself to the music. I don't know what I looked like. I don't know how I moved.

Probably I was not good on my own. But I was made a part of something that was good. And that seemed to improve me. Kind of like being a vessel cracked and marred yet still held in the hands of the potter. I was made something greater than I was. I was fashioned even into someone who could dance.

The point is not whether you can march or dance this dance of life and faith. You can: you are guided by the potter's hands and filled with the contents of blessing.

You are a dancing vessel carrying the sacred love of God. May you join the dance...

Jesus' Grand March of grace.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Paul Sampley, "The Second Letter to the Corinthians," The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary vol. XI. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 2000. p 81.

<sup>2</sup> "MADD founder's daughter killed by drunk driver." *History.com*. <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/madd-founders-daughter-killed-by-drunk-driver>

<sup>3</sup> "Candy Lightner." *Wikipedia*. © last updated April 8, 2011. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Candy\\_Lightner](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Candy_Lightner)

<sup>4</sup> Ray Buckley, *Hard to Dance with the Devil on Your Back*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 2010. pp 54-55.

<sup>5</sup> Yolanda Covington-Ward (Assistant Professor, Department of Africana Studies University of Pittsburgh ydc1@pitt.edu), *Shifting Representations, Transformational Dances: The Grand March and Liberian Identity*. Revised Abstract for: Building an African Presence Conference/CGT, Columbia University [http://cgt.columbia.edu/files/papers/CovingtonWard\\_Revised\\_Abstract\\_Building\\_An\\_African\\_Presence\\_Conference.pdf](http://cgt.columbia.edu/files/papers/CovingtonWard_Revised_Abstract_Building_An_African_Presence_Conference.pdf)