

“Will You, Won’t You Join the Dance?”  
Comments on A DAY FOR DANCING by Warren Howell  
December 14, 2008

Will you, won’t you, will you, won’t you, will you, won’t you join the dance?  
Will you, won’t you, will you, won’t you, won’t you, will you join the dance?<sup>1</sup>

*I don’t ordinarily provide spoken introduction to our music, but I thought that a few comments and explanations would help you draw more meaning out of our worship together today. A Day for Dancing is a collection of carols – meant for dancing. All of the words and most of the music comes from the carol tradition, wherein the Gospel story is rehearsed, and “is ever new as it is old.”*

But I would like to add to that explanation these comments, and I’ll begin with a song:

*I danced in the morning when the world was begun  
And I danced in the moon and I danced in the sun  
I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth  
At Bethlehem I had my birth.*

*Dance, then wherever you may be –  
I am the Lord of the dance, said he –  
And I’ll lead you all, wherever you may be –  
And I’ll lead you all in the dance, said he.<sup>2</sup>*

Those words are from a modern-day carol, penned in the 1960s by the late English poet, Sydney Carter. They were set to a well known Shaker dance melody and the two fit together like hand-in-glove: as well they should, because carols were originally meant to be performed with dancing.

By definition, a carol is a certain folk song comprised of two parts:

1. a strophic set of stanzas
2. followed by a refrain repeated after each

As folk songs, their origin cannot be traced to one person specifically but generally belong to a community of people. Carols were born in the middle ages *outside* of the church...in the common places by common people. They were songs performed by traveling singers and dancers at festivals – and since most feasts were centered in the church calendar, most carols are religious in nature. But there are carols appropriate for all the various celebrations of the church, AND not all carols were sacred. True, the ones we know carry religious themes, but that’s because the ones we know are ones we’ve learned in church.

So while carols are not limited to Christmas, not all songs at Christmas are carols. “Joy to the World” (which we sang earlier) is a hymn by Isaac Watts. But “Good Christian Friends, Rejoice” (which we will sing in a short while) IS A CAROL. Therefore, sing lustily. . . and it will foster a dance. Listen closely. . . you may hear the feet of angels dancing.

Which brings me to that *OTHER* topic: Dancing.

Recently, when I’ve told people that we would be dancing in church today, I’ve seen raised eyebrows, and heard expressions of surprise – and even one person did a double-take. It seems as if dancing were the last thing that they would expect to see in church. Outside of the Pentecostal groups, dancing in church is typically viewed with suspicion (especially by Baptists): perhaps the result of a too permissive stance toward society, a dangerous loitering near heretical beliefs or at the very least, possible evidence of other sins. Perhaps we better check the communion wine.

But dancing is a universal expression – found in religions around the world. It is has certainly been a partner to Christian devotion. How could it *not* be, when the king David (from whose line our Jesus was descended) DANCED before the ark of the Lord?

“You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy” says the psalmist,

for “there is a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance,” we’re told.

Therefore, “Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre.”

Yet while the church through the years has been hot and cold toward dancing, it certainly has been known from time to time to pick up its feet – especially in the middle-ages. But somewhere along the line, mainline protestants dropped step with the dance. In fact, if we were limited to but one definition of “main-line denominations”, it might be:

“that group of Christians that don’t dance.”

We can attribute this development to an overly intellectual approach to faith, a false separation of the body from the mind. Moreover, since they don’t have a copyright on dancing, church leaders have been cautious about other associations with the form. Certainly, they didn’t wish to be confused with the pagans (who also danced), and there’s always the concern that it might lead to “*other things*.”

But until we invest our bodies into our faith, we're only half-way in.

- Dancing can be in the form of a mime – which narrates a story (not uncommon to a practice seen at St. John's)
- It can be non-representational, an expression of joy, or thanksgiving
- It can be a voiceless prayer, or interpret some ceremony or meaning
- It can sound a festive note as in a procession
- or it can foster fellowship (as in a Shaker circle dance)

And according to legend and myth as old as recorded time, found in cave paintings and even more recently on the Discovery Channel, it is not limited to humans. Yes, animals dance...but according to Botticelli, so do angels.

In his painting, "Mystic Nativity"<sup>3</sup>, the Florentine artist depicts a scene that is divided into two realms – the lower half features an un-typical nativity scene. There is a reverent-looking pair of Mary and Joseph, gazing upon baby Jesus, and a few onlookers (animals and shepherds), but the characters are somewhat stiff. And while most nativity scenes depict a peaceful and pastoral arrangement, this one portrays a curiously different scene.

The manger is a crude shed in front of a cave with jagged, almost lance-like rocks and shards. There is an arduous, thorny path that leads up to it, with weary pilgrims being consoled by angels. And there are even little demons being warded off by the angels. All of these characters are angular and frozen. The observer would draw from the painting that the pilgrimage to the baby Jesus is difficult and dangerous.

But the upper half of the painting is totally different. In stark contrast to the world depicted below, the artist provides us a glimpse into a realm of effortless joy. It starts atop the manger's thatched roof, whereupon a cluster of three angels sing out of a choir book. And above them, there is a dome in the sky – like ours, but golden. And in the dome there moves the most graceful, fluid, lovely circle of angels, holding hands and dancing above the scene below. Unlike the earthly creatures, rigid and locked in awkward poses, these heavenly messengers are in pure elegance. They seem to not be bound to the motionless moment as those below, but have come to life and liberation.

Gone is all sorrow, gone is all pain, gone is all concern as around they go. As the circle is a symbol of eternity, I wonder if they're still dancing.

And that dance extends to us. Move beyond this time, and join the dance.  
The dance of the universe is a great circle dance which wheels around the tensions  
of what appears to us as opposites<sup>4</sup>:

We are flesh – we are spirit  
We are of God – we are of the earth  
We are body – we are soul.

These tensions, when laid out, form a grand cross:

Heaven and earth  
Body and spirit  
Time and eternity  
Abundance and sacrifice  
Suffering and joy  
Humanity and divinity  
Darkness and light

Christ spoke:  
I am the Alpha and the Omega  
I am the beginning and the end  
I am the coming together of opposites  
I am the dance.

Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, will you, won't you join the dance?  
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<sup>1</sup> From "The Lobster Quadrille," *Alice In Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll.

<sup>2</sup> From "Lord of the Dance", by Sydney Carter (1915-2004) © 1963, Stainer and Bell (Hope Publishing Co., in North America.)

<sup>3</sup> The painting can be viewed at website of the National Gallery, London ([www.nationalgallery.org.uk](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk))

<sup>4</sup> Based upon *Crossings*, by Susan Palo Cherwien © Morningstar Music Publishers (January 1, 2003)