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“Curb Your Enthusiasm?” GPPC 7-15-18
Ephesians 1:3-14, 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12-19

This past week our church’s fine Christian Educator, Kim Row, and I took seven of Guilford Park’s middle schoolers to the Massanetta Springs Middle School Youth Conference. We packed the church van and left on Tuesday morning and pulled into the Massanetta parking lot by mid-afternoon. And we were greeted by a pack of high school leaders holding signs, jumping around, and hollering greetings at the top of their lungs. After unpacking the van and getting to our rooms, we settled into several days of worship, study, and play with about 250 middle schoolers and their leaders.

Worship at the conference is conducted as follows. Prior to worship, the middle school youth and leaders climb a nice, steep hill to gather outside Hudson Hall, a wooden outdoor auditorium devoid of air conditioning, but mercifully supplied with large windows and ceiling fans. A few minutes before the appointed time, the high school leaders known as “enablers,” stick their heads out of the auditorium windows and begin singing songs and shouting chants that beckon the middle

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schoolers to be filled with appropriate enthusiasm for what lies ahead. This goes on for some time. Then at last there is a countdown, 10-9-8...the auditorium doors are opened and the middle schoolers file through a gauntlet of enablers into the worship space as contemporary music blasts and high fives are given. When finally the middle schoolers arrive at their seats, they're greeted by the enablers running around the gathered worship assembly while alternately screaming and dancing. It's as though the universe has been taken over by a gang of happy cheerleaders and the dance team. Heaven help you if you're an introvert.

Before worship begins, numerous "energizers" must be taught by the enablers and then performed by everyone in the congregation, including the adult leaders. Energizers are basically dozens of dance moves linked together to accompany music booming from the loudspeakers. The music selections are a dizzying hodgepodge collection that come from a number of decades reaching from the 70s--Grease and "Go, greased lightning!" to the 80s--Toto and "I bless the rains down in Africa!" to Rap--Kirk Franklin "Do you want a

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revolution?! Whoop! Whoop! Do you want a revolution?! Whoop!

Whoop!” And 21st century--Lady Gaga “I’m a gypsy, gypsy, gypsy!”

Dance moves include “the barrel roll” (demonstrate), “the Bernie,” (demonstrate), “the King Tut,” (demonstrate), and “the camel stomp.” (Please get Kim to demonstrate the camel stomp for you, because she’s really good at it and it is beyond my limited dance abilities.)

After the energizers, we did indeed have prayer, contemporary Christian music, scripture readings, a sermon “keynote” buttressed by skits and movie clip. And it was all well done. Still, what tends to stick in my memory (and I suspect in the memory of most of the youth) is the energizers, the dancing. There is something compelling about dance, isn’t there?

This morning we read about King David and his own dance. When the story takes place, Israel has been consolidated into one kingdom with God as sovereign and David as the earthly king. And David has the Ark of the Covenant brought into Jerusalem, the new capital for the country and for religious life.

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The ark itself is mysterious. It had been taken by an enemy, the Philistines, then recaptured, and for many years hidden away in some little Podunk town. Now David has it brought by procession to Jerusalem in a display of great power and celebration.

The Israelites, our spiritual forebears, did not, of course, imagine that God was or could be contained in the ark. God was and is beyond our containing, controlling, or completely understanding. God remained and remains beyond us all. But as one scholar explains, the ark "...was a portable religious shrine, the symbol of the presence of Yahweh...Most likely it symbolized the throne of Yahweh." (John H. Hayes, in *Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year B, After Pentecost*, 62-63.)

Some of you may remember the 1981 Harrison Ford movie "Raiders of the Lost Ark." It probably gives us a decent idea of what the Ark of the Covenant may have actually looked like. And you may also remember from the movie's ending that the ark, like God, was nothing to be trifled with. In fact, in verses 6-11 that the lectionary skipped over this morning, God is recorded as actually killing someone for touching

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the ark. It is a deeply troubling scene for those of us who believe in a God who loves us unconditionally.

But David has the Ark of the Covenant brought into Jerusalem in fantastic celebration—with shouting, songs, and the playing of lyres, harps, tambourines, castanets, cymbals, trumpets. Oh, and there’s dancing. David and all the house of Israel dancing before the Lord. And David dancing “with all his might” before the Lord.

One Bible scholar offers at least three insights on the scene. First, he says that the dancing here is a metaphor for worship. In worship, he says, “God takes us out of ourselves, sets us free from the plod of merely getting across the street, pulls us into a divine dance.” (Eugene Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, 165.) As we truly worship God on Sundays, we are lifted out of our mundane existence and transported to another realm of being. Have you ever felt that as you worshiped?

But second, there is David’s wife, Michal, who looks out her window, and sees her husband, King David “leaping and dancing,” and she despises him in her heart. Why? Does she think his dancing needs refinement—a trip to a theological Arthur Murray Dance School? Is he

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embarrassing her? Later in the chapter she claims in disgust that he has *exposed* himself. Is this literal or figurative or both? We do not know.

But as the Bible scholar notes, Michal is the worship critic. And the story is a “warning and rebuke to all who are more interested in the protocol of worship than in worshipping God.” (*Ibid.* 164.)

Are you and I mostly worshipers invested and engrossed in hearing God and experiencing God on Sunday morning, or are we mainly worship critics?

And third, the Bible scholar says, “Aside from Jesus, David is the single most important influence on worship in Judaism and the church. David has influenced far more people by his worship than he ever did by his politics.” (*Ibid.* 165-166.)

That’s true, isn’t it? What happens in worship on Sunday mornings shapes us as a people more than we can ever imagine. Sunday after Sunday, year after year, (repetition is key), God is forming and transforming us into the people of God.

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And worship then shapes the politics of the people of God so that those politics, imperfect as they are, are more aligned with the fairness and compassion of the God we know in Jesus Christ.

And it seems to me that though dance is a good metaphor for worship, it is also a good metaphor for enthusiasm. You may know that the word “enthusiasm” originally carried the sense of being “possessed by God, inspired by God.” David’s dancing shows that he is possessed by God, and though as we know, he is an imperfect leader, a fellow sinner, David’s enthusiasm *for* God and *by* God will give him the ability to lead Israel in the years ahead.

Enthusiasm, of course, has been something we Presbyterians have been wary of *and* something we have embraced at the same time. For example, when Hitler and the Nazis came to power in Germany, most of the German Christians, what became “the German National Church” embraced them and accepted their policies. These years later, how heartbreaking it is to watch film footage of millions of Germans, including those who called themselves Christians, gathered in massive rallies as Hitler blamed not only Jews, but also LGBT folks, gypsies, and

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people with physical disabilities for the troubles of the German people. And these Christians, blinded to their nationalism and unable to see God's truth, marched and cheered in delirious reverence for Der Führer, the Father, as church and state melded as one. It is chilling to see that film footage and to know where it led—to the murder of millions of people who were demonized and said to be inferior.

But there were also Christians who opposed Hitler and the Nazis. Some of these were Christians came from our stream of the Christian faith, what we call the Reformed Church. Along with Lutheran and United churches, they helped to form the Confessing Church that stood against the Third Reich. Members of these resistance churches were persecuted by the Nazis, of course. Some of their leaders were arrested. Some were drafted into the German army. Some were tortured and murdered.

But they did not give up. They wrote a theological statement that is in the Presbyterian Church's Book of Confessions. It's called The Theological Declaration of Barmen (you can find it online or in the church's library). And the major emphasis of this document is simple

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and clear. The church is to be the conscience not the vehicle of the state. Jesus Christ is Lord. Jesus Christ alone is Lord.

You see, the German National Church that went along with Hitler had a false, demonic enthusiasm. But the Confessing Church that stood against Hitler and his legions of hell, had a true enthusiasm, a being possessed by God, an enthusiasm that enabled that church to discern truth from lies, faithfulness from heresy, and life from death.

It's not usually so dramatic, but I believe in every age the church is faced with the same kinds of choices. Because evil is strong, there will always be something and someone trying to tempt the church away from what should be its rightful enthusiasm—the God we know in Jesus Christ.

As the writer of Ephesians put it, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.”

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Like our spiritual ancestors, let us pray to God to be a discerning church, constantly asking of every issue and every action, “What is the truth? Does this build up or destroy, increase love or increase hatred? Is this faithful to the God we have seen revealed in Jesus Christ or not?”

And like our spiritual forebears, especially David, let us be an enthusiastic church, possessed not by evil but by God, dancing the dance of worship and of truth and of love now and for eternity. Amen. ©Jeff

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