

Faithful Flesh: Bodies in Motion

SUNDAY, JULY 18, 2010

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2 Samuel 6:1-5, 15-23

Roger Bosse picked me up from the Detroit airport for my first trip to Battle Creek. I was coming here to do face-to-face interviews and a neutral pulpit. It was mid-winter; there was snow on the ground. The drive from Detroit to Battle Creek was enjoyable as Roger and I quickly fell into easy and deep conversation. We made a stop in Ann Arbor for a quick bite to eat and then returned quickly to the freeway in order to make it on time for Awestruck. It was a Wednesday night. We arrived on the church property and Aaron Jordan greeted us at the door. I was immediately impressed by the beauty of this sanctuary, but didn't have long to take it all in before I was ushered into the sound booth room. Ministerial candidates aren't really supposed to mingle with church members until a final call has been extended, so the committee had me observe the Awestruck service right up there, behind that dark glass.

Now I'll tell you: from the very minute that I started receiving written correspondence from First Congregational Church of Battle Creek, I felt a holy rumbling in my heart. But I had my total conversion experience up in that sound booth. I knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that I wanted to be the associate pastor of this church when I witnessed Callie Harmon come to the center of

this floor, stretch her arms out like an angel in flight, and dance with the Holy Spirit. That's when I knew.

I wanted a church that valued young people and I wanted a church that made room for dance, both things deeply personal and spiritual for me. I got both here and I give thanks to God.

When Tom and I first started talking about "Faithful Flesh: reflections on embodied spirituality" I knew I wanted dance to be part of the worship series. Wednesday night of this week, we made that happen. Several segments of the service included people on this floor moving to music. We asked people to use their bodies as a vessel of the spirit, to react in an embodied way to the moving spirit of God. For some, this was an exciting invitation. Some people felt freed up to express their devotion to God in ways that felt physically authentic and spiritually enlivening. Others chose not to participate because dancing did not and does not feel like a preferred expression of worship.

Tom and I sat together the next day to debrief the Awestruck service. While Tom appreciates dance and enjoyed the service overall, there were moments of fear for him. Moments when he was afraid of being put on the spot, afraid that someone would pull him on the dance floor and he would either have to dance when he didn't want to in order to appease the invitation, or refuse to dance and look like a spoil sport. He said "it was like being at a junior high dance all over again... sweaty palms and all." For people who don't like to dance, being pushed or pulled on the dance floor can be a terrifying experience and certainly not a worship-

ful one. Tom describes moments like that - moments of forced participation in worship - as “being held hostage.”

Believe it or not, your pastors are quite different. Tom finds spiritual connection in acts of quiet contemplation like bible study, prayer, private morning devotions, and sitting on the porch watching the deer go by. I, on the other hand, feel most connected to God while taking martial arts classes, dancing in night clubs, and walking briskly next to large bodies of water. My most frequent place of sermon inspiration now is the YMCA elliptical; I kid you not. Movement comes naturally to me, especially dancing. I cannot hear good music, whether it's gospel, hip hop or blue grass without bopping my head and shuffling my feet. When I'm in worship services where movement is stifled or discouraged, I feel like I'm “being held hostage.”

There you have it, Tom and I both experience being held hostage in worship from time to time, but in completely opposite ways. Some might say that the difference between us is age. But I know plenty of folks Tom's age that love to boogie, and I know plenty of people my age who feel most spiritually alive in silence and stillness. Age isn't it. Some might say that the difference between us is gender. But I know plenty of men who get down on the dance floor and some women without a teaspoon of rhythm in all their bodies. Gender isn't it. Some might say it's a mid-west versus west-coast thing. Again, there are too many examples to the contrary for that to be true. Geography isn't it.

So what is the difference?

So far I have been focusing on dance, but I actually think dance is just one example of a much larger phenomenon...a phenomenon I like to call "spiritual orientation." You often hear the term "sexual orientation" to describe where and how and with whom people feel the power of romantic attraction. Well, I use "spiritual orientation" to describe where and how and with whom people feel the power of God. So I think the difference between us is one of spiritual orientation. Let me explain.

We have a church two blocks up from here where people talk in tongues and get slain in the spirit for hours and hours on Sundays. We've got a church around the corner where afro centric music and liturgy are the norm every week. A couple miles from here people enjoy packing a warehouse with thousands of other worshippers and watching their charismatic pastor preach on a large screen. For some people Latin is the language of God; for others it's Hebrew or Tagalog or Farsi; for others the language of God is silence. Some people dress in their finest threads for worship; others come in jeans and sandals. Some people like candles, incense, and ornate symbols in the sanctuary; others prefer as little aesthetic distraction as possible. The truth is: our ways of experiencing God are as diverse as our cultures, our families, and our bodies. As a result, we have a plethora of spiritual orientations co-existing (sometimes peacefully, other times violently) on Earth.

Our diversity in experiencing God's power says something profound about God's wisdom, something profound about God's love and desire to connect with us. Only a deity with infinite commitment and creativity

could continue minute after minute, day after day, year after year, reaching such wildly different and messy and beautiful people. Our diversity tells me God is working overtime, double-time, ALL THE TIME, to reach us in a multitude of ways. What an awesome God. What a merciful and magnificent power. What a wonderful God we serve.

Whereas our diversity might reflect God's perfection, we sure haven't mirrored that perfection back. Some of the biggest blood baths in world history have come because people of different spiritual orientations just couldn't get along. Part of the struggle with diversity - and particularly religious diversity - is that we often think the thing that works for us is what should work for everyone. I'm so grateful to God that I grew up in the United Church of Christ, where from an early age I was taught that no religion or denomination had a monopoly on God. I know our denomination isn't perfect, but I'm proud to be part of a tradition that makes intentional space for differences in belief, identity, and worship styles. And I know our church isn't perfect, but I'm proud to be part of a worshipping community that expresses itself in multiple ways. I certainly know your pastors aren't perfect, but I'm so grateful to be part of a staff that recognizes and embraces differing spiritual orientations as a strength.

Now let me be clear about one thing: this is not a post-modern, anything-goes in worship sermon. Not all acts in worship are created equal. Often times I think we focus our evaluation of what's good worship or bad worship on form. But form isn't the issue. It's about

content. It's not about dancing or not dancing. It's not about whether we should pray silently or in unison out loud. It's about content, it's about *whether* what we do... *whatever* we chose to do...is an authentic expression of reverence in response to God's felt power.

I know some of you are wondering if I forgot the bible. Nope! Today's passage beautifully illustrates some of the issues that arise **because** of diverse worship styles. Second Samuel is about a period of transition in the life of the Israelites. Prior to the election of David as King and the brief, yet tragic reign of Saul, the Israelites had been a tribal and nomadic people. During those tribal times, the location of worship moved around with the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark symbolized God's dwelling place and it traveled, mostly because Israelite leaders thought it brought good luck during battle. Once David was commissioned to be the political and religious ruler of Israel, the process of uniting those tribes into a monarchy began. When we enter the story in 2 Samuel 6, David has just been elected and he's bringing the Ark into Jerusalem. This is a processional—just imagine a worship service and inauguration ceremony wrapped in one. While David is dancing with all his might, he is entering what will become the capitol city and location of the temple. The people are being brought under one ruler and one house of worship at the same time. It is a time of social, religious, and political consolidation, and power dynamics are at play.

David's body becomes a site of those power dynamics. Some people join him in the dancing and celebration, while others look on in suspicion and judgment. Michal,

who happens to be one of David's wives and, importantly, the daughter of Saul (David's predecessor) looks at David in contempt. She wonders if David's dancing is reverence for God or just self-glorification. While many biblical scholars and preachers have portrayed Michal's suspicion as jealousy and contempt, I think she raises a perfectly valid and faithful question. It is a question that every religious community should grapple with from time to time.

When our bodies are in motion during worship, whether it's dancing, singing, praying, or listening—the question of honor is relevant. No one way of worshipping will ever emerge as the right or wrong way because our spiritual orientations are so splendidly different. But again: not all things done in worship are created equal. The question isn't about form, it's about whether the content of our worship honors God.

When I sat in that little sound booth, trying to decide whether or not I was going to pack up my life in California and leave everything I'd ever known, for this place that I didn't have a clue about, something about Callie Harmon's body in motion told me everything I needed to know about God being honored in this place.

Hallelujah and amen.