

January 31, 2016

TEXT: I Corinthians 13:1–13

TITLE: The Dance of Covenant & Love

Is there anything more romantic, more cultured and sophisticated than dance and ballet? Even the very words we use to describe dance movements are like pearls cast upon the air: arabesque, grand jeté, glissade, pirouette, pas de deux. Sure, it helps that the words are all in French and the dancers are so graceful and strong. But as Charles Baudelaire said, “Dancing is poetry with arms and legs.”

Now, I’m not a big dancer, nor do I know much about dancing. So when I arranged for Attack Theatre to perform during worship today, I decided I should read up a bit on what makes a good dancer. In particular, I wanted to know how dancers learn to dance together so gracefully. Luckily I found a website titled “Basic Guide for Boys in a Pas de Deux.” Great! *Rule #1: First and foremost, talk to your partner. If you can’t communicate, you won’t be a good partner.* OK, that good advice for all relationships. *Rule #2: Every girl is different. Take the time to find out what she prefers and don’t assume you know.* Again, very good advice for life in general. *Next rules: Get used to sweat. Chances are you’re just as sweaty as she is. Just deal with it and you’ll get used to it. If you drop a girl more than once, she’ll never trust you again—so don’t drop them. If for some reason she does fall, fall down too and let her land on you. At least you’re softer than the floor.*

Alright, so much for the glamorous side of dance! Dance is clearly a lot of work with much of it being unglamorous, tedious, and at times painful. It takes effort and training to turn lumbering Homo sapiens into Rudolf Nureyev and Misty Copeland, to turn graceless human creatures into graceful dancers. On top of all that physical training, it also takes hours of practice, communication, and trust-building in order for two dancers to perform well together. It really is like the rules I quoted: *Talk to one another. Find out what they prefer. Get used to sweat and don’t drop one another.*

To me, dance is a perfect analogy for a life of faith. Both are things of beauty but things you must work on every day. Both require communication and trust. And when we fall, we have a partner in Christ who will always pick us up again. Faith is a pas de deux between us and God, a give-and-take dance between the Creator and the Created. Theologically we call this a “covenant”—a mutual relationship of faith, hope and love. But honestly we could just as well call it a ballet of the heart and soul.

When I pictured dancers performing here on our chancel, the scripture that came to mind was the “love chapter” of I Corinthians 13. It too is filled with beautiful language, even when read in English with a Pittsburgh accent. It is wonderful poetry like pearls cast on the air—*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but have not love, I am nothing, just a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.*

That's part of the reason why this passage is so popular at wedding services. When I read the verses earlier I imagine that you pictured a wedding couple, bouquets and rented tuxedos. And even though I Corinthians 13 never mentions God or Jesus or marriage, its poetic description of love brings out our sentimental sides, just like saying "pas de deux" sounds so cultured to our ears.

But there's a different reason why chapter 13 comes near the end of the letter from the apostle Paul. If we really want to understand what is being said here, we need to read the 12 chapters that precede the "love chapter," because Paul is writing to a church that is troubled and full of conflict. Chapter 1: After his opening salutation, Paul quickly gets to the point: *Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me that there are quarrels among you. Chapter 3—As long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving according to human inclinations? Chapter 5—Your boasting is not a good thing. Chapter 7—[How can you have] lawsuits with one another? You yourselves are wronging and defrauding others, and believers at that. Chapter 8—[Don't you know that] knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.*

If you listen closely to I Corinthians 13, when it talks about love, it starts with two positive things (love is patient and kind) and then follows with eight negative things (love is not envious, boastful, arrogant or rude; it does not insist on its own way, is not irritable or resentful, and does not rejoice in wrongdoing). Why is that? Because everything Paul says love is not, the Corinthians are; everything he says love is, they are not. John Calvin wrote that Paul intended chapter 13 to be a reprimand to the Corinthians so they might recognize their own faults in his descriptions of what love is supposed to be. Now at a wedding service, the couple hears how love is patient and kind and not envious, boastful or rude—and in their loving gaze, they silently say to one another, "We'll never be irritable or resentful with one another, my lovey-dovey." While out in the pews, couples hear these verses and nudge their spouses thinking, "Hey, love means not being rude or doing those other things."

Ask a dancer how many times she's been dropped. Ask yourself how many times you've been let down. We disappoint in our relationships, even our most loving ones—whether with one another or to God. *C'est la vie*. Most often these failings happen when we fall victim to pride and vanity, when we define the world solely by our own standards. Oscar Wilde was once petulant after a play of his was criticized. His retort was this: *My play was a complete success. The audience was a failure*. The apostle Paul would have us correct this sinful tendency. He reminds us that too commonly we see in a mirror dimly. And a mirror by definition can only show us ourselves. Paul calls prideful behavior "childish ways" and reminds us that we are adults and need to put aside childish things that do not lead to true love, true faith or true life.

Now, here's the good news. Not only is the world dependent upon God. In a real way, God has chosen also to be dependent upon the world. We are the canvas on which God creates a work of art. We are the stage where God chooses to be lovingly active. We are God's covenant partners in this life's amazing pas de deux. Let's be clear: This dance requires practice. It requires dedication. It requires prayer, better known as talking with your dance partner. It requires humility, better known as not assuming you know what is right all the time. It requires sweat and messiness and getting up off the floor when things go wrong, just as it leads to grace and delight and a beautiful give-and-take that makes life, well, a lovely ballet. One theologian put it this way: *We are to live God-centered lives in order that all of life may be a sacred dance and a sacrament.*¹

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber once told this story: Long ago, a rabbi, whose grandfather had been a pupil of the great Hasidic teacher Baal Shem Tov, said, 'My grandfather was paralyzed. One day he was asked to tell how the great teacher used to jump and dance when he was praying. Suddenly my grandfather stood up while telling the story and the story carried him away so much that he had to jump and dance to show how the master had done it. From that moment on, he was healed.' That was a powerful story.²

The faith story ought to be told so that it is just as powerful and transformative. We share the gospel through words and deeds; yet perhaps we should imagine this sharing as a type of dance. We awaken and Christ greets us, extending a hand to help us rise, and then goes beside us wherever we go, behind us to lift us up, before us to show us the way. Others join us in this dance and we copy the moves we've learned from Christ and extend our hands, our help, our leadership to them. We do so with patience and kindness. We do so without being envious or boastful or prideful or rude. We dance together knowing there are more important things than always being right, always being in control, and always being in the spotlight. We do this dance every day, practicing it through times of worship as a church, but also through our roles as parents, co-workers, and friends. At times we are lifted up and our soul rejoices. At times we remain earth-bound, but the memory of the dance sustains us even in moments of loss and sadness. *Je ne sais pas*. I don't know how else to describe this, except to say this dance with God is for each of you, and it is one of faith, of hope, and of love, these three—and the greatest of these is love.

¹ Anthony Robinson, *Theology Today*, July 1995, p. 263.

² Martin Buber, *Werke III*, Munich 1963, p. 71.