Dancing to a Different Song

One of my favorite moments at Our Community Cup Coffeehouse is when the dancing starts. There’s a musician playing with a good, strong beat and first one, then on a good night maybe another two or three, people get up and begin to dance. The dance isn’t what you’d see at the Philadelphia Ballet. It’s not necessarily beautiful in an esthetic way. It’s mostly just jumping up and down, flapping hands and feet in response to the music. But often the dance is just that much off from what the rest of us are hearing, as if the dancers are moving to a slightly different song. Regardless of that, the dance is filled with so much energy and joy that it’s infectious and I find myself wanting to cast aside my inhibitions and join in.

I wonder if that kind of dance might be what’s happening in the section of Ephesians we read this morning. It’s the part of the letter that includes a lot of instructions on how to live your life as a Christian. The instructions are very similar to those of a lot of other writers in that part of the world at the time, especially those writing from the practical position of the Stoic philosophers, but they’re just that much off, as if the writer is understanding a the world in a way that’s just a bit different from the way most people see it. The difference is because living life in the light of Jesus Christ is different at its root from living life without Christ – without the grace of his forgiveness, without the wonder of his glory, without the example of his life and death in self-giving love. Jesus changes everything, even the way you relate to your spouse or your kids or the way you conduct your business.

I think that’s a challenge for Christians in the United States right now. We are used to thinking about our country as, if not a Christian nation, at least a nation that is ruled by Judeo-Christian ethics, rules that say you should not only love God and put God first, but also you should love your neighbor and treat him or her the same way you would like to be treated, that you should treat the poor with compassion and welcome the stranger. As long as we held to those public ideals, it was fairly easy to be a Christian in this country. Now, on the public stage at least, it feels like a lot of those rules are being thrown under the bus. Living as a Christian no longer fits in as well in the world around us. We are out of step.

Being out of step is uncomfortable. There’s a part of us that wants to get back in step, so we try to figure out what the new rules are and how we can fit in. At its best, that means we leave some of our Christian identity behind as we try to fit in. At its worst, as we play by the worst rules of power always wins and as long as no one knows it doesn’t count, it leads to things like the clergy abuse and sexual misconduct scandals that the Catholic church is struggling to deal with, a mess that we Presbyterians are also not immune to. The church is subverted by the power of evil and becomes a betrayal of Christ. Thank God that’s not what happens most of the time. But even when we make small compromises to fit in, to get back in step with the rest of the world, something important in terms of our faith is lost.

And so the writer of Ephesians encourages his readers – and us – “ Don’t waste your time on useless work, the barren pursuits of darkness. Expose these things for the sham they are. It’s a scandal when people waste their lives on things they must do in the darkness where no one will see. Rip the cover off those frauds and see how attractive they look in the light of Christ. ….Watch your step! Use your head! Make use of the time you have!”

So we stumble on, just that much out of step with the world around us. Because it is uncomfortable, maybe you do what I do, listen to the news a little less, pull back from the world just a little bit because the conflict between who we are called to be and what we are called to do in Christ and what seems to be called for in other places is more than we can easily bear.

What if we tried it another way? What if we tuned our ear to hear the song of Christ – the song that is a hymn of praise to God’s abundant grace, a song that proclaims Christ’s glory even when the days are dark, a song filled with joy and gratitude. That is the song to the One who has transformed our lives and all our human relationships. It is a song based not in human frailty and failure, but in God’s great grace and glory that is used to redeem and reconcile a broken world. That song underlies the whole letter to the Ephesians, even as the writer addresses the struggle to lead one’s life as a Christian even when the powers of darkness are still in play.

So the writer of Ephesians tells us not to bother getting drunk on wine, to numb ourselves and create a false happiness, but instead, let the Spirit fill us, so we end up singing not drinking songs that only last for a moment, but hymns of praise that ring through our whole lives.

That’s a different song than many others hear. It’s not based in the beat of our own self-interest, but of a life lived in response to God’s grace and love. Yes, we may be out of step with others, but does it really matter if we are the ones who are singing and stepping to the true beat, to God’s beat? If we do that, maybe we can be like my friends at Coffeehouse, dancing with such joy and energy that others will at the very least watch and wonder what is going on and then maybe be tempted to join in the dance as well.

The song of praise starts here, in worship, as we turn toward God in song and prayer. It spills out into our lives, into our marriages and our as we strive to love family as Christ loved us and into our work lives, as we do our best to serve others with enthusiasm and commitment. It is lived out here in our church, as together we learn how to live together in such a way that we build one another up by speaking the truth in love. What if it spreads even beyond that? We’ve already begun, as we reach out through Our Community Cup and the Feast from the Garden and the ASD Parent Support Group to show people a new way, a different way to live and move and be in the different reality Christ has created.

There’s a great music video of Mick Jagger and Davie Bowie from more years ago than I like to remember, with joy and energy inviting everyone around the world to join them “dancin’ in the street”. “calling out around the world, are you ready for a brand new beat?...It’s an invitation across the nation, a chance for folks to meet… it doesn’t matter what you wear as long as you are there – dancin’ in the street!”

Our world is ready for a brand new beat – or a new birth of a very old one, the beat of the song of God’s grace and glory, the beat of a song of unity and reconciliation, the beat of a song of joy and thanks, a song that invites everyone to join in, no matter who they are. How about if we show the world what it looks like to sing that different song, to dance to that different beat, and invite them to sing and dance along!

Ephesians says, “Be filled with the Spirt as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Let’s start singing!