

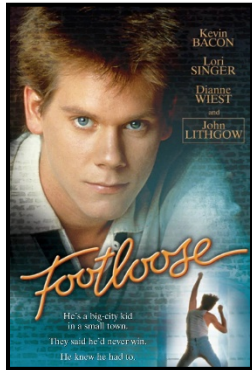
Footloose in New Canaan

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Sunday, July 15, 2018

2 Samuel 6:12-19/ Mark 6:14-29

Do you say “footloose and fancy free” here in New England? It is a favorite phrase in the south when all the kids are finally out of the house and parents are free to do as they please. Of course, that is as much an illusion as the ones young people have when they graduate from high school.



The term “footloose” was popularized again in 1984 by the hit movie. In it, Ren, played by a young Kevin Bacon, moves from Chicago to the small town of Bomont. He is a dancer, but he discovers that the religious folks in this town are convinced that *you can't have a praying knee and a dancing foot on the same leg.*

I'm not sure when the joy of Jesus got disconnected from our faith, but I for one am on Ren's side. Christians should be dancers, if not with their feet then at least with their hearts.



It is impossible to know just how long humans have been dancing. Today's first reading is almost 3,000 years old, and there are paintings on caves recording humans dancing more than 9,000 years ago.

I'll confess that dancing is a bit of a mystery to me. Perhaps it is my own inhibitions or my lack of rhythm, but I'm not much of a dancer. On our first date almost 38 years ago, Bill took me to the ballet. It is amazing there was a second date.

Our scripture lessons for today are very different, except they both describe people dancing. These two dances, however, are so different:

- Salome's dance for her step-father and his guests was so sensual that it elicited from him an overly generous promise to give her anything she wanted, including up to half his kingdom, whereupon her mother, Herodias, tells her to ask for the head of John the Baptist. John had insulted Herodias by condemning her for abandoning her husband to marry his more successful brother.
- In the other reading, we see the exuberance of David, who had just become King of Israel. He danced with uninhibited joy as an expression of his love for God.



In these dancing forebearers, we find two models of how life often is lived. Salome dances to someone else's tune and uses her life's energy, passion, and talent to gain the advantage. Ultimately, she dances to her mother's tune, asking from life what her mother wants for her.

To some extent, we all dance to the music our parents played for us. If you are not regularly horrified to realize that you are growing up to be your parents, then you are still a teenager who doesn't yet recognize your fate.

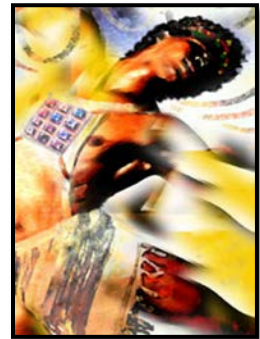
Salome was so driven by her need to please her mother that she didn't hesitate to take the life of an innocent man.

How often do we hurt those we love because we are dancing to old tunes that have left us angry or bruised?



Herod had no desire to execute John the Baptist. The prophet was no real threat to him, but losing face worried him. Perhaps even the king was dancing to the music of insecurity he had heard play in his heart since he was a child. He couldn't appear weak before his guests, so he killed a holy man. Herod would be haunted by this for the rest of his life, even believing that Jesus was John come back to punish him.

David's dance was very different. It was, in many ways, just the opposite of Salome's. David dances with such complete and uninhibited love and joy that he danced right out of his clothes, which embarrasses his wife, Mikal. David, however, was dancing for an audience of One, and she wasn't the one. Although far from a perfect person, David had learned to dance to the music of heaven. That is why the Bible, which records all his mistakes, still calls him a "person after God's own heart." (1 Samuel 13:4)



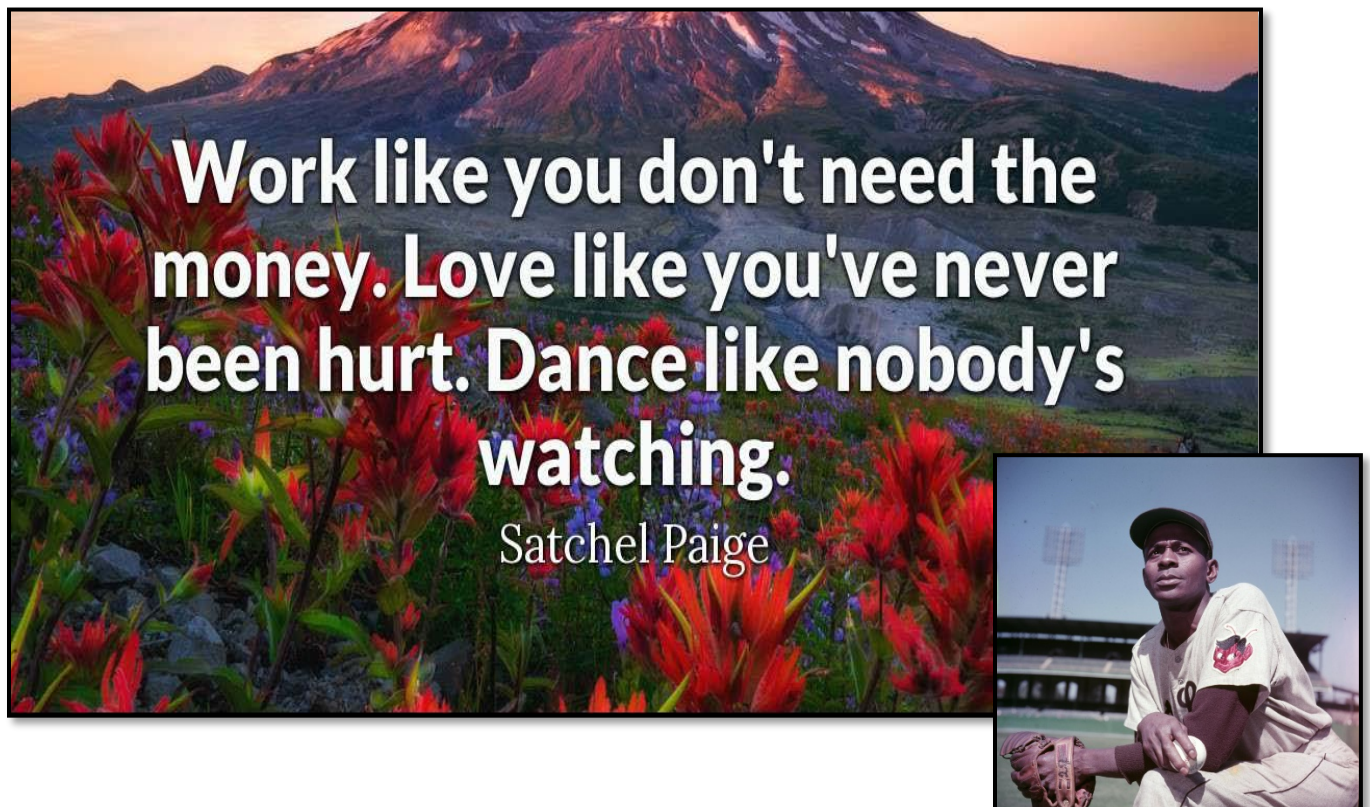
Was it the exuberance and lack of inhibition of David's faith that made him a soul after God's own heart, or was it a love affair with God that gave him such exuberant freedom to dance his way through life?

Exuberance: lively, cheerful, overflowing with enthusiasm, or, my favorite definition, living with such passionate joy that you make those who meet you happy!

When was the last time that you were so exuberant you embarrassed your family? Wouldn't you love it if, at least for one minute every day, you were simply overwhelmed with joy?

You once were an exuberant person. Children have an amazing capacity for uninhibited joy. Maybe that is what Jesus had in mind when he called us to become like children. Perhaps he is calling us to return to a time before life's struggles and responsibilities crushed exuberance out of us. So, how do we get it back?

I love that wonderful advice Satchel Paige once gave:



I would add, "Live as if only God's opinion matters!"

You can't dance when you are aware everyone is watching. Oh, you can perform, but that is a very different thing. Unfortunately, performance is what we substitute for living. Others become our audience, and we perform a role, forgetting who we might be.

I almost entitled this sermon ***Repeal Inhibition***. Someone gave me that button when I first came out because they thought I was too uptight. I tried to explain that I wasn't, I was just a preacher ... and a progressive one at that. If I'd been Pentecostal, or at least Evangelical, I might have been more passionate. Why is that?



Every time I teach a class on worship I start with the same quote:

Enthusiasm is not the enemy of the intellect.

Most African-American churches have managed to retain the passion, enthusiasm, and physicality of their faith. That is a lesson all mainline churches should learn. What's stopping us? Are we racist, so we don't want to worship like that, or simply classist?

Jesus said that the most important spiritual law was to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. That's number one. Well, most progressive churches have the MIND thing down, but where is the exuberance of our love for God? I like to say, "Humans shall not live by head alone."

Truthfully, most of us have areas in our lives where we are free of inhibition and where we are able to live with exuberance. Some of us can yell ourselves hoarse at a football or basketball game or at a concert, but showing enthusiasm for God embarrasses us.

Even though he was king, David didn't care who saw him. He danced to a love song they couldn't hear.

Perhaps it is different for kings than for queens. Growing up feeling queer left many of us painfully self-conscious. We were ridiculed for being tomboys or sissies. We learned to avoid calling attention to ourselves lest we face ridicule. Or we disconnected from who we really were and learned to play a role. Now, as nearly as I can tell, the only difference between gay and straight people is that gay people knew we were playing a part.

Herodias wanted John killed because he pointed out her sins. John caused her to lose face, so, rather than admit her faults, she used her daughter's dance to have her critic killed.

David did not dance with exuberance because he never made mistakes. King David committed sins as grave as King Herod's. The difference was, when the prophet Nathan pointed out his mistakes, David didn't have Nathan beheaded. David wept and repented with the same passion with which he danced.

Because David acknowledged his sin with grief, and took responsibility for his actions, he was able to also pray, "Restore unto me the JOY of my salvation." I think David was asking God to help him recover his exuberance.

The people who dance through life with exuberance all their days are NOT those who never fail, or those who are playing a role to another's tune. Those whose dance endures are those who have fallen on their backsides in front of everyone and were the first to laugh. Then they got up to dance again. David danced to heaven's tune because he truly **believed** he was a soul after God's own heart.

There are lots of reasons we don't believe in our own goodness; perhaps we have made a mess of life, or maybe our dreams haven't all come true, or maybe tragedy made you secretly wonder if God has abandoned you.

Salome danced so she could gain Herod's approval. David danced because he knew he had God's approval. **Salome danced to get a prize, David danced because he was prized.**

That doesn't mean that David didn't know disappointments, failure, and great grief. He knew them all! When those things happen to most of us, we struggle to find some meaning in them. People after God's own heart don't try to find the meaning of tragedy, they try to give their pain meaning. Do you get the difference?

David is credited with having written many of the Psalms, including Psalm 30 in which he sings to God, "You have turned my mourning into dancing." (Psalm 30:11)

Tuesday is my birthday ... and I'm celebrating it by going to a session meeting. Actually, I don't mind. The person I loved most for almost 36 years died two years ago on my



birthday, and I still don't feel much like dancing. I may never regain the full exuberance I knew when my life was danced with Bill.

I never was a good dancer anyway. Still, every now and then, I feel my toe begin to tap, and I try to claim God's promise that joy will come again.

Amen.