

Rev. Dr. Bill Smutz

“Fortnightly”

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, February 7, 2021

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12-19

David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. David and all the people with him set out and went from Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the LORD of hosts who is enthroned on the cherubim. They carried the ark of God on a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark. David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the LORD with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.

It was told King David, ‘The LORD has blessed the household of Obed-edom and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God.’ So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing; and when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fattling. David danced before the LORD with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet.

As the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart.

They brought in the ark of the LORD, and set it in its place, inside the tent that David had pitched for it; and David offered burnt-offerings and offerings of well-being before the LORD. When David had finished offering the burnt-offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of hosts, and distributed food among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins. Then all the people went back to their homes.

John 2:1-10

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’ And Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.’ His mother said to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’ Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, ‘Fill the jars with water.’ And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, ‘Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.’ So, they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, ‘Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.’

As we begin our interim time together, I want to offer you first an invitation to look at a piece of information from me that was sent out in the e-blast from the church this past Thursday, February 5th. It is a document that talks about the congregation's tasks during interim time. And it talks about task of continuity as well as developmental task. And these are the kinds of things which you and I will be spending our time tending to. Task of continuity. Sunday comes every week. Worship must be attended to. There are births, there are deaths, there are weddings. There are pastoral needs. Those all must be attended to without a stop in coverage. And then the developmental task are things that we can work on together as the congregation thinks about, "What is next, what does God have in store for this place, and who might be the right pastor to serve us for God's next?" I invite you to go to the e-blast and find this document and take a look at it, if you haven't already done so. And if you don't have access to the e-blast, please call or email the church office, and one can be sent to you or mailed to you. Interim time is just too valuable a time to waste even a moment. And so, the first two sermons that I will be offering to you invite us to think about and talk about and work on interim tasks, those things that we must accomplish together here in interim time.

When I was a kid, the only mail that I ever received were postcards that my in-town grandparents sent to me when they were vacationing out West, or Valentine's cards from my out-of-town grandparents and from the great aunts that I rarely saw. So, in August, right before I started 7th grade, when an official looking letter in a business-sized envelope arrived at the house addressed to me, it was a big deal. I remember just staring at the envelope for a few moments, savoring the rare experience and trying to make sense of a return address that was not familiar to me: Webster Groves Fortnightly on some unknown street. Mom, who had called me to the kitchen and handed the envelope to me, seemed anxious that I should open the letter. And so, I made a point of finding the brass letter opener that was kept in a crock, which sat on a shelf in a corner covered in the kitchen. It was filled with pencils and scissors and all sorts of other treasures. I found the letter opener. And then trying to imitate what I had observed from my grandfather's suites in opening letters, I slit the top of the envelope and pulled the sheet of paper out and began reading. It didn't take more than a sentence or two for me to realize that this letter was toxic. It was radioactive, and that I needed to get away from this letter as far and as fast as I could.

Dear--it began. An ominous start since I only got called William when I was in trouble. Same thing still true today. Dear William, as you begin 7th grade, I am pleased to invite you to participate in Fortnightly this year. Fortnightly is an opportunity for young women and young men to gather one Friday night each month and learn the formal art of dancing. Mom, who seemed to know what this vile letter was all about, smiled at me and asked what it said. I threw the letter on the kitchen table like it was burning my fingers, and with a look of horror, told her it was an invitation to learn to dance with girls. Then filled with the overwhelming angst that only a 7th grader can muster, I shouted that there was no way I would ever do something that crazy, and I ran down the hall to the safety and the freedom of my bedroom. As I fled, I heard my mom say that she thought Fortnightly sounded like a nice thing to do. I knew, in that moment, that I was doomed. Fast forward a month now to a Friday evening in late September as my parents dropped me and three friends off at the front door of the Monday club, the four of us were wearing new clothes from head to toe, dress shoes, nice slacks, a fancy shirt with buttons on the collar, a real tie instead of a clip-on tie, a tie that made breathing difficult. And the ensemble was topped off by a new sports coat, a scratchy, odd fitting new experience sport code.

Each of us had taken a second shower that day, had been encouraged to use deodorant as we got dressed. And we had to pass a physical inspection before leaving our respective houses. Upon arrival, we slunk out of the car and through the front door of the club to face certain calamity. Once inside, we encountered a large room lined on either side with chairs. All the girls who were wearing fancy dresses, which seemed as strange as our coats and ties, all the girls were on one side of the room talking excitedly. While all of us boys silently lined the other side of the room looking as if we were about to face a firing squad, staring at the floor hoping it would suddenly open up and swallow us. Before my friends and I could formulate an escape plan that had even a remote chance of being successful, the well-dressed adult couple in front of the room called us to attention and announced that for the next two hours we would be learning the box step and the rudiments of waltzing. And then the man looked at

us boys and said the absolute worst thing he could have possibly uttered, "Gentlemen, please find a partner." An interim pastor is much like a temporary dance partner. We are brought together by an event that as is surprising and maybe as unsettling as unexpected letters in August. The called and installed pastor has moved on to retirement due to disability, yes, but a separation that caught some off-guard. A separation that was perhaps long overdue for others. And any time there is a change in an emotional system like a family, like a church, any time there is change, one of the consequences of change is individual and communal anxiety. Anxiety that can spur immense creative energy as the congregation pivots towards the possibilities of God's future, anxiety that can fester in all manner of unhealthy and unhelpful actions and reactions. The way things have been, what we are used to will be no more and things have changed both here in the church, but especially in the wider world around us.

COVID has and continues to alter everything in ways which we don't fully realize or appreciate yet change is our constant companion these days and this is the crux of it. The word that we dread almost more than any other word in the English language, change. Interim time means change, change from what has been to what will be, change from subtle routines to something else, change from comfort to anxiety. Change from anxiety to beginning to breathe again, perhaps. Change from a known dance partner to one who is unfamiliar to one who has sweaty hands to one who needs at least one more breath mint to one who will undoubtedly step on our feet. Will it really be that bad, this interim time dancing this in-between time dancing? Is there any hope that learning can take place with a temporary dance partner or should we just stay on our respective sides of the room and sit this one out?

Our second Samuel lesson describes a time of dancing as a time of exuberance and abundance and generosity. David is trying to set up his capital in Jerusalem, but there is one major problem with his plans. The people of Israel have no historic or theological connections to Jerusalem. God has spoken to God's people on mountain tops and in the wilderness but never in Jerusalem. But David likes Jerusalem. And it's not that far from his old stomping grounds of Bethlehem and it sits in a place that is easy to defend and has a good and reliable water source. And maybe, just maybe David senses what others do not yet grasp that God's spirit inhabits Jerusalem. And as David is looking around for a way to legitimize Jerusalem, he remembers the ark, the Ark of the Covenant that Moses built to hold the tablets containing the 10 commandments. For centuries, the people of Israel literally believed that the ark was God's presence in their midst, the ark was such an object of uncontrollable power that those who touched it would die, that enemies who tried to steal the ark would experience all manner of maladies. But then in the time of the kings, King Saul and then King David, in that time the ark was seen and treated with less importance. In fact, when David hit upon the idea of bringing the ark into Jerusalem in order to bestow divine legitimacy, everyone struggled to recall where the ark had even gotten to. Finally, it was remembered that it was out in the country on someone's farm. But what was his name? Abin? Abinadab? That's right, that's it.

When David goes to collect the ark, he makes a production of it. There was a huge parade with a marching band, and food, and drink, and presents for everyone. And above all, there is dancing. David and all his officials dance with wild abandon, and the people on the parade route dance along with them. And the text even suggests that David dances so hard that he dances right out of his clothes and that some in the crowd are offended by that. At Fortnightly we changed dance partners two or three times each evening. Just as we were getting over the awkwardness of being so physically close to one partner, just as we were learning how to move a bit with each other, our instructors had us find new partners, and we began the process all over again. But each time we started over, we discovered that we were a little less nervous and got into the groove of the dance a bit more quickly. Interim time with an interim pastor, a temporary dance partner, is challenging at first. We may not be sure about each other. We may not want to be here. We may find the whole experience awkward. We may struggle to move together gracefully. And then, just when we're finally figuring it out, it will be time for a new called pastor to come, and I, the temporary dance partner, will move on.

The walking stick I came in with today, leaning down there on the side of the pulpit, is a stick that I will pick up and take with me on my last Sunday with you. This walking stick is a symbol of the temporary nature of our partnership. A symbol of the brief time in which we will journey together as God's children. Now we could say

that things are only temporary and why should we bother but I think that would be a horrible waste. A waste for you, a waste for me. I mean just think about the amazing example of David and the dancing he did before the ark. His dancing was only temporary. He only danced as long as it took to get the ark back to Jerusalem. But oh, what dancing he did. David's dancing was filled with energy and passion. His dancing was overflowing with abundance and generosity. Everyone went home that day filled and happy and gifted. What if we try to model our time together--this interim time? This time when we are temporary dance partners. What if we try to work together, to dance together with all the exuberance of David and his energy and passion and abundance and generosity? What if? I like our gospel story of Jesus' first miracle because it also points out God's generosity with us. Because this story is at a wedding and is about a celebration, I assume that dancing takes place and I assume that Jesus even joins in the dancing. But what really makes this story special to me is that when there is a need that Jesus can address, he is reluctant, but he doesn't refuse to help make a difference.

And the difference that Jesus makes is that of overwhelming abundance. Which allows the party and the dancing to continue and not just drag on but to continue joyfully. We worship a God of abundance, a God who has brought us together for some temporary period of time that we may dance together and work together and pray together and listen to the Holy Spirit together. And in all this dancing and listening and working so make us individually and all of us together as First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood, a more faithful, a more holy, a more gracious, a more generous place. So that we can begin to better understand God's future for us and our church and better know what we need to do in order to get there. And so, bring God glory. I am excited about this time before us. I am humbled to be your temporary dance partner. I look forward to our learning to move together. And I look forward to our embracing and imitating the generous and gracious abundance of God, which we see in the dancing of David and in the compassion of Jesus. Listen. Listen. I hear it. Do you hear it too? The music is beginning. It's time to dance my friends.

Pray with me. Loving God, God of the dance, guide us, we pray, as we move together into your future. Help us to move with grace and hope and abundance and generosity. Help us to move in all these ways as we have learned from Jesus. Amen.

