

“Lord of the Dance”

Mark 1:14-20

Third Sunday after the Epiphany; January 24, 2021

The movie *Billy Elliot* tells the story of a young man growing up in



a working-class neighborhood in northern England. The Elliot family had been miners for generations. Billy’s father is an admirer of real-life boxing world champion Ken

Buchanan, and hopes that his son would someday become a champion boxer. The son, however, is more interested in music, a passion he inherited from his late mother. Quite unexpectedly he discovers a love for classical music and finds out that he’s a good dancer. But Billy’s macho father and brother, fearing that Billy will be seen as a “poof,” become outraged at the idea of him becoming a professional ballet dancer.

Over the months and years that follow, Billy’s father learns to entrust his son to a world he can barely understand. At the end of the movie we see the old man come to London to watch his son leap and

turn and dance with beauty and true joy. And the father's face beams with sheer pride and true joy about his son.

As we read Mark's gospel no idea is given as to how many generations the Zebedee family had been fishing on the Sea of Galilee. In that country and culture, as in many countries and cultures to this day, a family's vocation can be handed-on not only through generations but also through centuries. It's generally secure. People know how to do what they're doing. One's legacy is in the hands of one's children. If times get hard, the usual answer is basically to work harder. Old Zebedee probably wanted to retire some day.

But then comes a young upstart prophet from Nazareth, who's tells his boys, James and John, and their neighbors Peter and Andrew, to drop it all and follow him. It reminds me of the time when I was strolling through some boat docks where I saw a young man making some adjustments on his fishing equipment. I wondered how he would respond if I told told him to give it all up and follow me — or better yet, to give it all up and follow Jesus. Without doubt he would think I was some sort of kook. Only when you think about the sort of life Peter,

Andrew, James, and John had had, and the totally unknown future Jesus invited them into, can you even begin to get the gist of how world-shattering this simple little story was and yet still is. Imagine leaving everything you have ever known — all your security, your family (and family solidarity was hugely important in that culture) — to go off and follow Jesus. Some people face that call today.

The way Mark tells the story sends echoes back through the scriptures, the larger narrative of God and God's people. In fact, the entire biblical narrative hinges on Genesis 12:1: "Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.'" Abram, later known as Abraham, like Peter and the others, simply did what he was told and went where he was sent. Mark isn't being very subtle when hinting to us that the old family business of the people of God is being left behind. God has some new music to dance to. God is calling a new people to get up and dance.

And the name of the music is "the kingdom of God." This is what all of Israel had been waiting for. This is what the prophets had prophesied — God's Messiah inaugurating the kingdom of God. It

wasn't a new piece of clever philosophical advice. It wasn't a new political agenda. It wasn't a new type of spirituality. It might eventually lead to advice, agendas, certainly to prayer, but the kingdom of God is something far more than any and all of these. Try as we too often do, the kingdom of God can't be contained. It was and still is the good (and extremely dangerous!) news that the living God is on the move. Jesus embodied it with some exceptional footwork. He charged through Galilee announcing, "The time is fulfilled... God's kingdom is arriving! Turn back, and believe the good news!" Well, golly, that demands a intentional response — right? This is good news.

Notice how Jesus picks the moment to act. As long as John the baptizer was announcing the kingdom down by the river Jordan, Jesus could bide his time. But when John is arrested and thrown into prison, Jesus knows it's time to act. Everything we can see from observing Jesus suggests that he prayed and waited upon his heavenly Father for a sense that the moment had arrived. But the Lord God speaks through situations and events as well as through the still, small voice in the heart. And now God was saying that if this kingdom-movement was to go

forwards rather than nowhere, it was time for Jesus to go public with his own vocation. So he came to the Galilean villages, not as a stationary prophet like John the baptizer, but as a wandering one. Jesus is a messenger urgently moving around to tell people what was going on. And his message was that God's time had come. The moment had arrived, you freedom craving people. Get up and dance!

If you or I were to walk through Vicksburg (assuming that people had some Christian background) and were to call out "Turn back" (in other words "repent") and believe the good news — other than thinking you were nuts, most people would think they knew what you meant: "Give up your sins and become a Christian." Jesus, of course, wanted people to stop sinning, but "repentance" for him meant two rather different things as well. First, it meant turning away from the social and political agendas which were driving Israel into crazy, ruinous conflict. It's not hard to imagine Jesus saying that today in a country where ideologies are driving people into violent or at least mean-spirited behavior. Second, it meant calling Israel to turn back to a true loyalty to Yahweh, their God. Again, it's not hard to imagine this same Jesus

pointing out the two greatest commandments in a country today like he said to Israel, “Listen... ‘the Lord is your God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your understanding, and with all your strength.’” And... “‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other commandment is greater than these” (Mark 12:29-31).

And, as anyone with just a smattering of knowledge of the scriptures would recognize, this is what had to happen before God would redeem Israel at last. Follow the logical conclusion to any country today. The call to repent is part of the announcement that this is the time for the great moment of freedom, of God’s rescue. Jesus is sounding the call. The Lord is dancing!

The dance has a name: *perichoresis* — that’s the Greek word for dance. It’s the term used by the early Christians as a metaphor to refer to the Trinity — God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. Picture a folk dance, a round



perichoresis

dance, with three partners in each set. The music starts up, and the partners holding hands begin to move in a circle. On signal from the caller, they release hands, change partners, and weave in and out, swinging first one and then another. The tempo increases, the partners move more swiftly with and between and among one another, swinging and twirling, embracing and releasing, holding on and letting go. But there's no confusion, every movement is cleanly coordinated in precise rhythms (these are skillful dancers!), each person maintains his or her identity. To the onlooker, the movements are so swift that it's impossible at times to distinguish one person from another. The steps are so intricate that it's difficult to anticipate the actual configurations as they appear. That's *perichoresis* — a dance. The essence of Trinity — the centerpiece of Christian theology — and often considered one of the least understandable of all doctrines, is portrayed here in a picture that anyone can observe in an all-American barn dance.

Perichoresis proclaims a unity that we in this fragmented world desperately need. We are mortals — human flesh and blood — who are male and female, black, white and other shades. We need to know each

other, love each other. The world is a perilous place. A global pandemic is devastating people. People are devastating people. Acts of violence are increasing. Less understandable is the sad fact that Christians are suspicious of other Christians. Don't we have all the central things — God, making; Christ, awaking; the Holy Spirit, blessing — in common? Trinity is the church's attempt to understand God's revelation of the divine-self is all its parts and relationships. Is it a mistake to believe that if God is not understood as Trinitarian, then it's not really Christianity? No.

Trinity gives us an understanding of God that's most emphatically personal. God is nothing if not personal. If God is revealed as personal, the only way that God can be known is in personal response. We need to know this —desperately. It's the easiest thing in the world to use words as a kind of abstract truth or principle, to deal with the gospel as just another piece of information. The culture has largely dumbed-down what it means to be a Christian because we have allowed it. Trinity prevents us from doing this. We can never get away with depersonalizing the gospel truth to make it easier, simpler, more

convenient, or to serve a constituency or nationalist agenda. Knowing God through impersonal abstractions is ruled out, knowing God through programmatic projects is abandoned, knowing God as a private project is forbidden. Trinity insists that God isn't an idea or a force or a private-use commodity. The Trinitarian God is personal and known only in personal response and engagement — like a dance.

Trinity also prevents us from reducing God to what we can understand or need at any one time. There's a lot going on in us and this world, far exceeding what we're capable of taking in. In dealing in God, we're dealing in mystery, in what we don't know, in what we can't control or deal with on our terms. We need to know this, for we live an arrogant world that over-respects the practical. We want God to be "relevant" to our lifestyle. We want what we can, as we say, "get a handle on." We succumb to the immediate peer pressure to reduce God, cramming God in to fit immediate needs and expectations. But God is never a commodity us to use. We need to understand this. Don't you think that if anything God is sick and tired of being used in such cynical

ways? It doesn't matter who we are or how righteous we consider ourselves to be. We need to repent. God is not confined in our box.

There's a lot of foolish talk about God nowadays. Why? Because many of these loud voices (and some of these voices are *very* loud!) don't talk *of* God with reverence. Faced with a reality that we can't control, we must cultivate reverence. We're in the presence of the One who is both before us and beyond us. When we actually listen, we find that presumption — God on our terms — is exposed as simply ignorant. Dumbing God down to the level of our emotions, and thinking and then demanding that God work by the terms of our agenda, is set aside in favor of a life of worship and prayer, obedience and love. This is a way of life that's open and responsive to what *God* is doing rather than one in which we plot strategies to somehow get God on board with what *we're* doing. Trinity keeps pulling us into a far larger, more interesting world than we can imagine on our own.

That's why Jesus gave the call to believe. Jesus's contemporaries trusted all sorts of things: their ancestry, their land, their Temple, their ideologues, their laws. Even their God — provided that their God did

what they expected him to do. Read the entire gospel narrative and you will see large numbers of people getting really rabid about this lame trust in other stuff. Sound familiar? Jesus was, and still is, calling God's people to trust the good news that their God was and is doing something new. To get in on the dance, all of us — each and every person — has to cut loose from other ties and trust Jesus and his message.

We need to know this. What we hear is a steady call and invitation not only to Peter and Andrew, James and John — but to us — to participate in the energetically active life of God (the image of the dance again). It's the participation in the Trinity (God as God chooses to be revealed to us) that make things and people distinctively who they are. We are not spectators to God. There's always a hand reaching out to pull us into the Trinitarian actions of holy creation, holy salvation, and holy community. God is never a non-participant in what God does. Nor are any of us. There are no non-participants in a Trinity-revealed life. You need to know this. If you're going to know God, you have to participate in the relationship that is God. Here you discover yourself as a unique participant — each person is one-of-a kind — in the life of

God. The Christian life isn't pre-programmed. It's a release into *God's* freedom as revealed by the kingdom of God. That's what true freedom really looks like. And *that's* the freedom that should be first and foremost on a Christian's mind.

Hope is hearing the melody of the future. Faith is the dance to it. Love is joining with others. We need to know this. The Lord is dancing! This is good news! This is true joy! — for us and for our salvation.

O Lord, our God, the Holy Three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — the Three-in-One, Blessed Trinity. With a word you spoke creation into being, and out of glorious excesses of your eternal community, you mad humanity. In your wisdom, we mysteriously bear your image. In your wisdom, you have made us from community, you have made us for each other. In the fullness of time, you sent Jesus and today we remember his call to follow, to dance, and in the power of your Spirit, we obey. Amen.