

**Do We Have To Dance?
Jon Frost
Genesis 18: 1-15, 21: 1-7**

Wedding season is in full swing - perhaps many of you have weddings coming up this summer. I love weddings - but there is a moment in the whole wedding experience that causes me great anxiety. It's usually introduced by someone saying something like this, "Alright everybody, come on out and join the happy couple on the dance floor." So here's my thing with dancing, and this is way more pertinent to when it's mostly modern pop music as opposed to the more classic jazz standards. Generally, like a lot of other social situations, my personality type would have me observe what's going on from the outside before diving in, making sure it's safe and that I will not have unwelcome focused attention on myself. Specifically with dancing...I mean have you seen people dance? Have you objectively analyzed the visual aesthetics of a group of people non-professionally dancing? I mean if you could somehow remove the music and just observe the dancing...the strange movements and the varying degrees of rhythmic precision, you'd have a hard time convincing anyone why humans should ever be taken seriously.

And yet, as I'm usually at weddings with my wife, my verbal and non-verbal plea for mercy "Do we have to dance?" is met with a resolute and nonnegotiable dragging unto the dance floor.

This story is one of many great stories in the book of Genesis. It's sort of comical really, and a bit peculiar. But what kind of story is this? Since the lectionary pairs this with the beginning of chapter 21, it packages the two sections nicely and neatly as a birth announcement and fulfillment. You could also read it as a story about divine visitation, with God somehow being present in three strange visitors.

But what caught my attention in my reading of this story is the practice of hospitality. If we were to stop reading after Abraham notices that three strangers are standing near him, we might assume that these three pose an immediate threat to Abraham and his family. There are plenty of other encounters in Scripture that would support this assumption. And yet in that ancient culture of frequent hostility, Abraham hastens to respond with hospitality. Somehow he recognizes in the presence of these strangers the very presence of God. The text is ambiguous on who these three are. At times they all seem to speak together. At times one speaks as God.

Perhaps, Abraham isn't exactly sure who he is dealing with, but he responds to these three strangers with an almost sacramental reverence. He runs to them, bows down, provides water for washing, gives them rest, takes the finest bread and meat and gives it to them. He makes space for them and in turn encounters the Holy One. Hospitality is a sacred act.

Then, once the strangers have been welcomed and received as guests, now there is the opportunity to welcome their message. And let's be honest about this. Their message is

nothing short of ridiculous. For several chapters now, God has been promising descendants to the almost centenarian couple and to make Abraham's name great. Yet here they are in chapter 18, pushing 100, and still childless. So we might forgive Sarah for laughing at the guest who promised to return in a year's time to find Sarah with a son born to her. In all fairness, a chapter earlier Abraham fell on his face laughing at the very same promise.

They've moved on from the dream of a child - biologically, and, reading between the lines of Sarah's thought in v12, perhaps romantically as well. The Hebrew word for pleasure kind of only means one thing. Actually, maybe that is what the laughter is all about. The Lord asks, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?"



In the 15th century, a Russian iconographer named Andrei Rublev created this icon of the Holy Trinity based on this story from Genesis 18, reflecting on the scene of the three guests as a picture of the Trinity. Franciscan priest Richard Rohr reflects on this icon in a recent book entitled *The Divine Dance*, writing, "The Holy One in the form of Three — eating and drinking, in infinite hospitality and utter enjoyment between themselves. If we take the depiction of God in *The Trinity* seriously, we have to say, "In the beginning was the Relationship."

This way of seeing the Trinity is consistent with how, historically, the Eastern branch of the Church has understood God. From as early as the 4th century, the Eastern Church Fathers used a greek word, *perichoresis*, to describe the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The first part of the word, *peri*, means "around," and the second, *choresis*, is derived from a word meaning "to make room for". It's where we get the word choreography. So essentially, this image of God is that of a dance in the round, where as one modern monk puts it, "An infinite current of love streams without ceasing, to and fro, to and fro, to and fro."

In Godself, there has been from eternity a perpetual hospitality if you will, a making space between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But the very nature of hospitality, or more fundamentally, the very nature of God, is to reach out and share the life that exists within Godself with God's creation. From creation to covenant, to Jesus refusing to exploit equality with God and taking on the form of a servant and dying on the cross, to the sending of the Spirit at Pentecost, God's love overflows to us and pursues us, inviting us into the dance.

Many who have contemplated this Trinity icon reflect on the fact that there seems to be an empty space at the table, inviting the viewer in. But we so often settle for ideas about God rather than experiencing God's presence among us. We attempt to understand God instead of commune with God in the everyday stuff of our lives because it is the very nature of God to be in relationship.

You know, the phrase “culture of frequent hostility” does not just describe the culture of Abraham’s day. In so many ways, we are seeing tragic stories played out where whatever is “other” than me is seen as a threat. And I believe God’s heart breaks every time we believe that lie.

Daring to be hospitable in a time when cultural forces seem to want us to divide, separate, and isolate; choosing love instead of fear; these are critical tasks for the Church today. For in making space for our neighbor, we are in fact making space for God.

If left on my own, I’d be perfectly happy watching others dance. But even a dancing naysayer like myself has to admit that some of the most fun and beautiful moments of life happen on a wedding dance floor - as strangers, friends, and family make space for one another, and throw concern about self-image out the window and dance like holy fools. So, do we have to dance? Yes. But in fact, we should probably say we get to dance.

Because the Triune God of love has invited us into the dance, the very life of God that has existed in Trinitarian community from all eternity, and is extended to us as God’s beloved sons and daughters. It’s the dance where nothing is too wonderful for God - where what seems impossible becomes possible.

It’s a dance for those who’ve seen good news come true, like the birth of a long promised son. But it’s also for those who are still waiting and for those who still laugh at the thought that good news ever could come true. It is the abundant life Jesus talked about and it isn’t way out there somewhere. It’s right here and it’s for you, me, and all of God’s children. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - Amen.

Resources:

ROHR, RICHARD. *DIVINE DANCE: The Trinity and Your Transformation*. S.I.: WHITAKER HOUSE, 2017. Print.

PC (USA) Directory for Worship W-1.02.