

## Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – 16 July 2006

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b – 19; Mark 6:14-29

“Dance then wherever you may be, I am the Lord of the dance” said he, “and I’ll lead you all, wherever you may be, and I’ll lead you all in the dance,” said he (from the Sydney Carter hymn ‘Lord of the Dance’).

So David and all the house of Israel were **dancing** before Yahweh (2 Samuel 6:5).

The Hebrew word for dance, *sachaq* used here, has a wide range of meanings, all the way from laugh - to mock - to play - to dance. (Seasons of the Spirit congregational life Pentecost 1, pg 65).

A King dancing is challenging enough, but a King playing before God, is perhaps even more so. We know this meaning for the word from Psalm 104:26 where God creates Leviathan, a mythical monster, to play in the sea. David and all Israel **play** before Yahweh. Play as an act of praise, play as an expression of joy. Perhaps we can look to Jesus who places children at the centre to teach us about holy play. When were you last this free-spirited? - but isn’t play just for children?

“Somewhere along the road of human development, we managed to shift play from fundamental to peripheral.” (pg 66, Seasons of the Spirit). “We think of play as a small subset of activities usually associated with children and childishness – embarrassing even”.

The idea of play, and play in church is a bit uncomfortable – okay for children, for others, but for us? “In fact, play is a much larger set of activities” Phil Porter, founder of Interplay, suggests: “to play is to do the things that we enjoy: that feed us; that we are compelled to do; that give us deep satisfaction; that lift our spirits; that are fun; that transport us; that are ephemeral; that lead to a sense of accomplishment; or that move us. That covers a wide territory, doesn’t it?”

(Look through this lens and you recognise that play is what the body wants/needs). Play makes us strong and confident. It makes communities generous and open. It fosters freedom and peace. Don’t we all want more of that? We have been cut off from play in so many ways. ‘Get your work done first’. ‘Don’t do that’. ‘How are you going to make a living?’

So many voices (even well-meaning ones) have invited - if not compelled us to restrict our physicality - to pull ourselves in, to be less than we might be. And I am glad that at some point in my life I learned to sit still. But we have been sitting still so much and so long. Our muscles and bones and spirits get quickly creaky.

What you consider to be play may be completely different than what I do. And we might surprise each other. I have heard many people describe the

meditative satisfaction of washing the dishes, or ironing. Some enjoy collating and stapling! I enjoy walking, or watching water flow.

In my own life, the world of work and the world of play are intersecting more and more. Since I have so much to do - I can't wait until I get it done - to play. I look for ***an attitude of play*** in all that I do – the joy, satisfaction, delight, meaning and engagement that is possible in almost any moment - and I am happier and healthier for it.

I believe that spirituality is actually a subset of play. Think about that for a moment. We have separated out the experiences from the realm of play, that lead to depth and meaning and peace, and have put them in a completely different territory. In many ways, we have made these experiences into “work” – full of obligation and responsibility. We are so serious about prayer and church and spirituality!

Play, despite our preconceptions, leads to depth as well as lightness. I have experienced it over and over and over again, in my own life and in the lives of those I have played with.

\* I remember dancing at an interplay retreat when my brother, Philip, was dying. We danced and sang – tears flowing down our cheeks – during the dance and in the conversations that followed, the whole group of us found ourselves crying and laughing at the same time. It was a holy moment of play.

It isn't hard to reclaim play. But once you do, don't lose it again.

We are over-socialised adults.

We don't risk falling off the wagon of responsibility. You too can have more joy, peace, delight, satisfaction and community. Really you can. And you will still be able to hold up your corner of the world. It will just be a bit more fun. (from 'What the Body Wants' by Cynthia Winton-Henry with Phil Porter, 2004, Northstone Publishing).

David danced – much to his wife Michal's displeasure.

He danced, and he, the people's shepherd provided food for his people – as God had done in the wilderness. That generous extravagant light touch was also seen in Jesus' inclusiveness.

Herodius danced too – for an audience of community leaders, local officials. She danced too for her father who was entranced – mesmerised. He couldn't get enough. Is this the lightness, the ethic of play I've been talking about? I don't think so. This is dangerous stuff - trying to please – using play for political purposes – playing with fire.....

This is not the spontaneous response to the divine, the playful naivete of David + joyful delight + the Israelites.

Herod beheaded John at the dancer's behest – to save face, to please the guest – all politics ..... but the dance went on – hence the question “Is Jesus John the Baptist back from the dead?”

The message Herod tried to tell, lived on in Jesus and beyond ..... in the playful foolishness of God. Jesus was killed too – but the dance went on and this sense is also captured in the letter to the Ephesians we heard read this morning.

On my birthday, Nikolai and I were in the Daintree. We visited the Eco Lodge. As we sat out on the decking, we watched barramundi swim by, an eel ..... in the afternoon we attended a workshop on indigenous art. We learned a lot and produced our own modest pieces. Using ochre and paint, each person in the group painted. Near the end of our time our leader asked us to tell the story of our paintings – it was amazing what emerged. (Each person was able ????)

Afterwards, Nikolai and I walked to a waterfall. It was a special time. At the waterfall:

I sang a lament for our cat Jean-Pierre who died

I danced .....

something shifted

a sense of peace .....

..... Jean-Pierre died

I grieved

in dance and song.

Someone once said, the glory of God is a person fully alive. This is my desire - to accept the gift, again and again and again, with my whole body. This is my prayer for me and for you - fullness of life!

I've just finished reading “Women turning Forty – Coming into our Fullness”, by Catherine Rountree, a book of interviews with women. One woman's words struck a chord. She speaks about dance as prayer. Gabrielle Roth says,

“I always danced. I loved to dance. I still love to dance. Dancing is my prayer. I dance when I'm happy, sad, angry, afraid. It's my mother tongue. It is always spiritual for me because I worship the spirit of the dance not its form. To dance deeply is to breathe deeply, to be in touch with the invisible force that moves us all. To surrender to the dance, to enter its beat and trance, to let it fly, free form, to find the unity in moving my body, to express my heart and empty my mind where the contraries dissolve and something else is ignited, something deeper, something divine (pg 95).

For the last decade, I've been exploring dance as part of my coming into fullness. Dance, as Arisika Razak, also interviewed in the book, explains:

“Dance is language. It is not aerobics. Dance is moving with spirit. It is a healing force. Dance is Grace”. She goes on: “Everyone can find a place where they not only feel comfortable but find Grace.” (pg 84)

I leave you with a quote from Catherine de Hueck Doherty:

“Prayer is that hunger for union which never lets go of us. It beats into our blood with the very beat of our hearts. It is a thirst that can be quenched by nothing except God. It’s as if one’s whole body is poised on tip-toe, our hands stretching upward as if to touch the cosmos. The act of praying, like the act of love, involves movement and effort. You don’t pray like a robot any more than you make love like one! Prayer is movement, stretching, seeking, holding, finding ...”

***This is my prayer for me and for you, fullness of life and a playful attitude!***