

Reading from the Old Testament: 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19

Whitney, Rebecca, and I are graduates of the venerable old southern institution of higher learning formerly known by the quaint, just-rolls-off-the-tongue name of Union Theological Seminary/Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Virginia (That would be UTSPSCEiV, which doesn't really lend itself to an embroidered hoodie). Located in the historic Ginter Park neighborhood of Richmond, VA, the campus quadrangle bisects, not surprisingly, Seminary Ave, a lovely oak lined road populated by beautiful early 20th Century slate-roofed homes. Directly across the street from the quad is a glorious stone manor once owned by the seminary known as The Neil Ray House, replete with oak-paneled walls, built-in bookshelves encased in beveled glass, grand staircases, and even a carriage house in the back.

The Neil Ray House once again serves its original purpose as a private residence, the seminary having sold it many years ago, and I remain hopeful that I did not contribute to the seminary's decision to put it on the market. You see, while in seminary, I was the co-chair of the party committee (*Let that sink in for a moment*).

I don't think it would surprise you that I've never been regarded as the *fun guy*. I cannot claim a former life as a party animal and no one has ever reacted to the mention of my name with that knowing smile and arched eyebrow that says, *O yeah ... partaayy!* Yet, here I was, the newly minted master of mirth in charge of putting together a dance party at the Neil Ray House – clearing out the stately dining room; picking up the keg at the distributor (*An awkward encounter to be sure. "I'm here to pick up a keg we reserved." Okay, name of organization? "Hmmm ... uh ... Union Theological Seminary" Oh... okaaay ... will that be a keg or a pony? – I don't drink beer. What do I know? So, I had to fake it. – "Sure, pony, stallion, thoroughbred ... whatever it takes"*). I was clearly in over my head.

Yet, I will say the one great perk of being the party chair is having control of the dance music. Dance music at a seminary, you ask? Can't imagine doin' *the Dougie* to *A Mighty Fortress? Pie Jesu?* Forget about it! We had everything from *The Talking Heads* to *Marvin Gaye* to *The Isley Brothers* ... "Just a little bit softer now..." At least that's what the police said when they dropped by.

But having control of the music does not mean having control of the dancers. Did you ever notice that wherever people are dancing, the same guy shows up? Let's call him Fred, the kind of guy that wears a blazer with a crest on it; like I might mistake him for Lord Astor or Prince Albert or Count Chocula. You've seen this guy. Thinks he's Michael Jackson. Dances like an electrified octopus – limbs flailing; head swinging; slamming into one person while simultaneously stepping on another dancer's foot. Have you seen this guy? Have you noticed that if he manages to catch your eye, which he so desperately wants to do, he just stares at you like, *Check me out!* ... Oh, we're checking you out, but what we're seeing isn't what you think we're seeing. You are thinking performance. We are thinking spectacle.

At least that is what Michal concluded as her husband David boogie, oogie, oogied his way into Jerusalem with the ark of the covenant in tow. "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." Sounds like your mom during your toddler tantrum at the grocery store. "You're making a spectacle of yourself!"

Much has been conjectured about David's dance and Michal's disapproval, and we have to be careful not to play pop psychologist here, but the text does raise questions about the gray area between calculated choreography and authentic spontaneous celebration; between superficial ritual and deep-seated conviction, between self-promotion and public worship. Is the Ark's entrance into the city of David politically scripted theatre or is it *You've-just-won-Publisher's Clearinghouse-joy*? One thing's for sure, it wasn't the finale of Broadway's *Oklahoma* or the rail platform *Bollywood* dance at the end of *Slumdog Millionaire*. Even in the moment, Michal makes it obvious that the party atmosphere was not universally intoxicating.

Jerusalem. Located in the rocky, uneven terrain at the edge of the Judean desert, the city had an arid climate with poor agricultural viability. A 1st Century Greek geographer named Strabo described it as a place that would not be envied, one for which no one would fight. And yet, it is among the most highly contested and conflicted pieces of real estate on the planet. So, how did a poorly endowed village with limited economic viability become Zion, basically, the capital city of God, the destination of pilgrimages, the heart of humanity's hopes and fears?

Well, today's text is central to understanding Jerusalem's transformation into the holy city of God. As God's anointed, David had established himself as a warrior worthy of kingship, having earned his bona fides as a leader and defender of Israel. Yet, at this point, David's kingdom was somewhat dispersed and splintered. To fully establish his kingship it was crucial for David to consolidate Israel, and Jerusalem's location was strategically located between the northern and southern peoples of Israel. David was savvy enough to understand that for Israel to become the legitimate nation-state the people had long wanted, it needed a legitimate capital city toward which the peoples' identity would be formed and in which their faith would be grounded.

The Psalmist says, "Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God. His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion... Walk about Zion, go all around it, count its towers, consider well its ramparts; go through its citadels, that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will be our guide forever."

So, what would bring Jerusalem legitimacy, establishing it as the city of David, the headquarters for God Incorporated, Mount Zion?

David's answer is the Ark of the Covenant, a powerful symbol of sacred presence long before Indiana Jones cracked his first whip.

A portable box containing the sacred tablets of the ten commandments given to Moses, the Ark represented the presence and power of the living God. Moses addressed the Ark as God and it led the people of Israel in the wilderness, it was carried around the walls of Jericho on the day those walls came a-tumblin' down, and it resided within the curtains of the Holy of Holies in Israel's nomadic tabernacle. David certainly knew the legend of the Ark and he understood that having the ark in the heart of Jerusalem would give the city and David himself legitimacy as the anointed of God, thus bringing the dispersed tribes together as one nation with one God and one king.

Moving the ark to Jerusalem was a shrewd political move, which on the one hand is troubling. To use religious symbols as a means of establishing political legitimacy or accessing a place of earthly power contradicts the very intent of the laws of God contained within the ark. Love God. Love neighbor. Serve God. Serve neighbor. There is nothing in those laws that would honor self-interest or justify the pursuit of earthly power. The use of religion to serve self-interest or as a platform

for self-promotion or political power is anathema to the will and ways of God revealed in Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul challenged us saying, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, 8 he humbled himself...” Jesus himself said, “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

The use of religion to justify the earthly pursuit of power is always suspect, and yet there has never been a time when power seekers haven't used religion to pursue their agendas. The prophet Samuel had warned the people about the ways of kings and politicians and principalities and how the lust for power can frost even the hearts of the faithful. David here falls prey to the seduction of power in so carefully scripting the optics in a way that would bring legitimacy to his reign.

When pomp and circumstance are portrayed as worship only to mask personal agendas, God is mocked. The observation of the prophet Amos would have been instructive to David in the planning of this choreographed parade of the Ark. “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I

take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals, I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” In the short term, David acquires at least the appearance of the legitimacy and power he pursues, but captive to earthly politics, he is sowing seeds for the eventual delegitimization and downfall of Israel’s kings.

It is a cautionary tale for these days of angry polarized partisanship, particularly where the name of Jesus is used to legitimize power grabs and policies which bear little resemblance to the person of Jesus. The test upon which we must depend in such a time? Does it look like Jesus? In other words, does it reveal compassion, pursue justice for all, and contain the marks of mercy?

A helpful word comes from Ghandi, a great admirer of the ways of the person of Jesus Christ. “The day the power of love overrules the love of power, the world will know peace.”

We will continue to see the ways David fell prey to the seductions and illusions of power, but here's the crazy thing about David. Yes, he was vulnerable to the lure of self-interest, but he was simultaneously a person of deep faith, limited and flawed in its application, just like us, but genuine, too. He truly wanted to honor God. He understood both the blessing and the weight of his calling. He could even be self-reflective and repentant. He connected his service to God to his love and leadership of God's people.

He was a person of prayer and felt God's presence within him, which brings us back to the carefully orchestrated parade of the Ark. David could organize the orchestra, tune up the choir, coordinate the rituals, and step into his fancy church clothes, but he couldn't control the Spirit of God that came powerfully upon him and the people that day. "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." She wasn't so much jealous of their unabashed joy as she was embarrassed by their audacious display of it.

It appears that maybe David's dancing wasn't in the script for the day. Evidently, this isn't the canned and coerced choreography of your high school chorus. "Never my love." No, this was more like Fred with the crested blazer thrashing across the dance floor and in serious need of a sedative, for in the next chapter we see Michal reading David the riot act because in his ecstatic reverie, he may have had a wardrobe malfunction, thus bringing the angry parent speech on himself, "You're making a spectacle of yourself." Michal's like the usher in the Presbyterian church shushing the animated visitor who says he's got the Holy Spirit: "Well, you didn't get it here, so you'll have to take it outside."

We can censure David for coopting a sacred symbol for political purposes, but we should honor and be moved by his genuine joy in the Lord and the spirit of praise and celebration in the community.

Paul said, "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say rejoice." The Psalmist instructs, "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing ... Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise." And none other than David exults, "So I have looked upon you in the

sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name. My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.”

de Chardin suggested that “Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God.” Mark Twain said, “To get the full value of joy you must have someone to divide it with.” That is why worship is the most important act in a community. David could seek to manipulate the moment when the Ark came to town, but he could not control the Spirit of God symbolized by that sacred box. Much like David, we enter these doors, our minds cluttered with agendas, plans, calendars, checklists, and all our efforts to control our lives, but here together in the presence of the living God, when our hearts are surprised by joy, we are relieved to discover at least for a moment, that our control is an illusion but our God is good. Our agendas are finite and flawed, but God’s loving purposes are perfect and God’s grace is relentless.

Perhaps the author of Hebrews sums it up best: “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.” Amen.