

## **Sermon for February 28, 2010**

### **The Rev John A. Baldwin**

Some of the more important lessons I've learned in life, I learned in Mrs. Bowles' dancing classes back in New Bedford, Massachusetts when I was 11 years old..... although I didn't fully realize it at the time. Mrs. Bowles was one of the grand dames of New Bedford society, and her classes took place in the ballroom of the downtown Whaler Hotel. The boys dressed up in suit and tie, and the girls in nice dresses. It was a big deal, and most of the time I dreaded it. But I learned a lot of life lessons in the process. Here are some of the things I was taught.

1. It's important to treat your partners with courtesy and respect. With her eagle eyes, Mrs. Bowles was on the prowl for breaches of etiquette. And she let you know if you weren't a gentleman or a lady in your interactions with others.
2. It's important to work together....to anticipate...to follow the patterns. Ballroom dancing can be complex. If you and your partner aren't in sync with one another, someone may have their toes trod upon. But when you are in rhythm together, anticipating what the other is about to do, and co-operating with one another, movement is fluid and graceful.
3. Some partners are more alluring and exciting than others. It was a time of dawning awareness for me that girls were more than just friends in the classroom. There was something thrilling about inviting a certain someone to be your partner. There were some partners I wanted to avoid at all costs, but ended up with anyway thanks to Mrs. Bowles' ingenious methods for mixing us up. There were others I wanted to dance with very much, but who were casting their eyes over my shoulder at the boy who was 3 inches taller with the curly red hair.
4. It's lonely, depressing and painful being on the sidelines. At least once every evening it was ladies' choice. Sometimes I was chosen as a partner right off, and sometimes I wasn't. I liked being invited to the dance. I didn't care at all about being the wallflower who sat on the edge of the dance floor watching.
5. Dancing can be filled with grace, rhythm and style. Although I was often self-conscious about how well I was dancing, every so often I'd do it rather well, with a partner who really flew across the floor. To go whirling about the room could be a thing of beauty. One...two... three, one...two...three, turn and again.

As I grew older, ballroom dancing wasn't the cool, "in" thing for a teenager to be doing. But dancing took other forms. The dancing of the 1960's (my teenage years) was more frenetic and individualized. There were all kinds of ways to be creative with your body movements. Yet here too, in the discos and Hullabaloo clubs, the things I learned in Mrs. Bowles' classes were important. Treat your partner with courtesy and respect. Anticipate and follow the patterns because no one likes hands waved in their face. It's no fun being a wallflower in a disco. And, movement in dance can be a thing of joy.

I've been talking about dance this morning because it's a good metaphor for our life together as a church community. When you enter the doors of a church, it's like entering upon a dance floor. Participants come and go. There is movement and motion. Things ebb and flow. Children cry or squirm in the pews. We sit and stand, sing and pray. Though we follow patterns, there's always something new and different. The dance of worship and community can be joyful and exhilarating, or it can be downright plodding and boring.

The lessons I learned from Mrs. Bowles' apply here too. It's important to work together...to anticipate...to follow the patterns of the liturgical dance. Some partners in worship we will find alluring and exciting. Others we want to avoid. Some people get right out into the middle of the dance floor, eager to mix it up and dance. Others will be wall flowers standing on the sidelines, waiting for someone to ask them to dance....and it's lonely, depressing and painful when they don't get invited as a partner into the dance of a parish's life.

Dancing is also a good metaphor for faith. God invites us to the dance at our Baptism, and offers us Jesus as our partner. Are we dancing with Jesus, or standing like wall flowers on the sidelines? Are we dancing our lives with joy and bounce, or plodding along, stepping on toes?

We might also ask what partners God is looking for in the dance of faith? Scripture points to God's tastes as being amazingly broad and diverse. In our Old Testament reading this morning, God invites Abraham, an 80 year old man with no children to the dance..... a dance which will bring him more descendants than there are stars in the sky. Jesus, of course, invited a motley crew to the dance including fishermen, a tax collector, and Paul himself (a fire-breathing hater of the early Christians), who in this morning's Epistle sees in Christ the power to change gawky no-bodies into glorious somebodies.

You have been invited to the dance of faith. Will you get out on the dance floor and swing with Jesus as your partner? Will you discover an exuberance in life that lifts you out of the ruts and into a rhythm of grace and joy? I hope that you will indeed discover the grace to kick up your heels and dance the dance of life with your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ as your partner and guide.

I'd like to leave you reflecting on the words of a song by Sydney Carter, sung by many to the tune of the old Shaker hymn "Tis the Gift to Be Simple". "They cut me down and I lept up high. I am the life that will never, never die. I'll live in you, if you live in me. I am the Lord of the Dance said He. 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. Amen.