

# Mourning, Dancing, and Carrying On

The Rev. Geoff Parker to First Parish Church - Brunswick, ME

Sunday, July 02, 2017

Scripture: [Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30](#)

## Introduction to the Scripture

Today's scripture is a passage from Jesus's engagement with John the Baptist's followers who have just conveyed John's question from prison: "Are you the one who is to come?" Jesus says, yes, and commends the prophetic voice of John. His followers leave, and Jesus is left speaking to the public about how both he *and John* have been received by the gatekeepers of faith. He begins with an interesting parable, one that we'll talk more about later.

For now, listen for who is participating in the parable, and who is not, and what Jesus says will be work, and what will be rest.

## Sermon

I am just returned from the [31st General Synod of the United Church of Christ](#) in Baltimore, Maryland. And boy is my everything tired. 737 delegates and thousands of visitors came together for worship, and work, and you know, Robert's Rules and all that... Caucus meetings for various groups start at 6:30 or earlier, and the day's work is often not complete until after 9:30. It is a *long* six days. But it was good, and it was inspiring to see us all together, and with a pretty compelling story to tell, what are called our three great loves:

1. Love of Children
2. Love of Neighbor
3. Love of Creation

One aspect of Synod that comes through clearly is the power of gathering a body this large, this diverse, but —indeed this United—as a church to discern and learn and work together. It is not for the faint of heart. We are people of old German piety, and Southern free traditions, a people of historic Euro-American and Black Congregationalists, and a people of new and emerging worship communities that merge traditions and practices of all colors, expressions, and backgrounds.

Our understanding, our justice, and our proclamation of what we so dearly hope is truly *good news* is only as good as our understanding of just how deep and broad the heart and mind of God can be. In the course of the last week, resolutions about the business of church and resolutions of social witness have been made more complete, more just, and more good by the addition of the wide variety of experiences of the United Church of Christ.

But this only works if we have that diversity. It only works if we make room for all. If we can call on all of our richness of experience together. If we can risk being this united body together.

One of the votes we took was to call The Rev. Traci Blackmon, our new Associate General Minister and Justice and Witness minister, is more than worthy of the work to which she has been called... which is a testimony of faith, that God is so faithful that God can continue to use even our committees to do good and holy work in the world. In opening worship, she took advantage of the day to recognize the 158th anniversary of Charles Blondin's first Niagra Falls walk. [You can see her entire sermon here.](#)

If you don't know him, Charles Blondin was a tightrope walker who made a cottage industry of walking across Niagra Falls. He walked across the rope multiple times, one in a sack, on stilts, on a bicycle, he stopped in the middle once and cooked an omelette. On July 15th, he came back with a wheelbarrow: "Do you believe I can carry someone across in this wheelbarrow?"

"YES!"

"Can I have a volunteer?"

If you know anyone else who was in Baltimore, you may have been hearing a lot about "getting in the wheelbarrow!"

They were excited to watch, but taking the risk themselves was a different story. We can often be excited to watch, but a little uncertain of how to get in and go, or if we trust ourselves, or trust our friends, or trust God with that great risk-taking walk together. We're worried about seeming like we don't know what we're doing, or like we know too much about what we're doing, we're worried about seeming too excited, or too bored, we're worried about seeming inauthentic, or too sincere. We can, as it turns out, rehearse a list of reasons why it would be embarrassing or strange, or too much work, or too dangerous to get into the wheelbarrow.

Jesus seems to know a little about this: his opening parable asks for audience participation, my least favorite of all participations... Jesus save me from mimes... See, in his culture, the mourning and dancing piece comes from a circle dance common in public life, in which children would play "wedding" and play "funeral": acting out the extremes of life in a shared dance. Jesus says that too many see the dance, but will not join in with either side. Just as too many, hearing John the Baptist, and hearing him, would not listen, would not follow. They had created a world in which each side— fasters and feasters— could find a reason not to join in. Jesus says, "Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

The beautiful thing for me about this image of the children's game? It's all one dance. Mourning, dancing? All one dance. Which is exceedingly good news, right? Because if the Jesus story was all about being happy, well, Lord knows I would have been cast into the outer darkness years ago, and we're really gonna have to workshop the last few chapters of those gospels until the very end. Jesus is saying in this parable, no matter where you are on your life or faith journey, there is a part in this dance for you. You are welcome here if you come to make music and to dance your joy. You are welcome here if it is all you can do to keep from wailing in your mourning and your grief. It all has a part.

Jesus says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens... my yoke is easy and my burden light.” Because you are invited to bring your whole self to this ministry, this life that we share together: no need to dress it up. Put down the weight of sitting out, or of performing.

A resolution advocating for the denomination’s support of legislation offering “aid in dying” was complicated by the voices of our members from the disabilities ministries, and was made clear that the structural challenges of our health care system mean that we must be very careful that those with disabilities and chronic to terminal diagnoses are not forced to choose death due to the financial burdens of their care.

Our members from communities of color helped us to understand that training for clergy in anti-racism and multi-cultural sensitivity for clergy, *and for the search committees that call pastors to the churches* is a this-very-minute need, not a goal for a ten year plan.

We need you, if you are up, sure, but also if you are cast down, and also if you are ready to rise up again. We need you with all the background and story that you come with, whether you think it’s baggage that you’d like to set down by Jesus, or whether you’ve got just the thing in your backpack that can sustain others on the journey...

We need mourners and dancers to help us reject the toxic masculinity and celebrate relationships free of the kind of terror and violence we saw in Madison, ME this week.

We need mourners and dancers to tell the truth about and reject our country’s racism and celebrate the places where we are finding new life in our communal multi-racial life when in these United States there were dozens of rallies of the Ku Klux Klan in public places this weekend.

We need mourners and dancers, we need you, with whatever hurts or whatever has been healed, to be this body of Christ.

It’s summer, I know that it is not the season of joining things in the New England church world... but maybe, just maybe, spend some time this summer thinking about which new ways you would like to join in: even if you are sure that your best gift would be to organize in excruciating detail a group of people to collapse on your backs and recognize that you are overwhelmed, and laden down with heavy burdens... that’s exactly the kind of group we could use!

But you, oh you my wonderful friends are exactly the person that Jesus is absolutely certain would be a wonderful addition to the dance... or, maybe, if you’re feeling spunky... there’s a wheelbarrow I have in mind for you...

Amen.