



## *“Dancing the Edge of Mystery”*

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Ephesians 1:3-14

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Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

We set high standards for our leaders – and we should. We expect national and local leaders to be exceptional people. We think they should know what they are doing – and look like they know what they’re doing.

I was once involved in selecting the president of a denomination. It was an interesting process. A word kept recurring in all the conversations. Beyond the job description and the spiritual and character qualifications needed, we were looking for someone who was “presidential.”

Presidential is difficult to define but we know it when we see it. The Romans called it “*gravitas*.” To have *gravitas* means to exhibit dignity of bearing, depth of character, maturity, restraint and rectitude. Being presidential means calmness and reserve when under fire or in the midst of crisis. We don’t want leaders who lose their temper, cannot restrain themselves or their emotions, are out of control, or flighty. We don’t want leaders who run from trouble or run off at the mouth. We want our leaders to have a weightiness of character that earns respect for the person and their office. We expect leaders to bear the weight of their office in an appropriate way.

Like it or not we hold leaders to a higher standard. We expect extraordinary behavior from political, business and religious leaders. And we should. We think the royal family should act in a royal manor and our president should be presidential. We want a wise, steady hand at the helm.

We are deeply disappointed, even outraged, when presidential tapes reveal presidents using gutter language and displaying racial bigotry or anti-Semitism. We are embarrassed by a governor who sneaks off to South America to meet his girlfriend thinking he won’t get caught, and when he is can’t stop talking about her. We want to interrupt his *mea culpa* and say, “Restrain yourself.”

Ironically, perhaps, we don’t hold our celebrities or sports heroes to high standards. We are a deeply confused people!

The image of *gravitas* or its absence may help us understand our strange Old Testament Lesson. It’s somewhat bizarre story about a dancing King David and his angry wife.

King David was young, just thirty years old, and wildly successful. He’d prevailed in the civil war that followed King Saul’s death. He drove the Philistines from the land of Israel, and in the process, liberated the Ark of the Covenant held hostage by the Philistines for decades. The young king was national hero and cultural icon.

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David decided to bring the Ark of the Covenant home in a grand parade through the countryside complete with marching soldiers, a band leading the people in patriotic and religious songs, and, of course, people cheering along the way.

It was a great day in the history of Israel. It was something like a combination of our Independence Day, celebrating the nation's founding, VJ Day, which celebrated the end of WWII, Easter -- after all, everything in Israel was religious, and Thanksgiving Day, a joyous remembrance of all God's blessings.

King David's parade unleashed long repressed national and spiritual passion. God, the Liberator, had acted on behalf of the people, and King David had led God's people to freedom. Israel's long national nightmare was over. The people were feeling good about themselves and their nation. And, as the story goes on to say, King David was feeling pretty good about himself. Being a thirty-year-old celebrity and monarch does tend to build one's self-image!

As the parade wound its way through the countryside, the people along the parade route, caught up in the spirit of the moment, began to sing along and to dance to the music. They "danced with all their might," the story says. Apparently it was a wild and passionate dance of freedom.

It was national celebration like Times Square after World War II. Personal and national passions were unleashed as people danced in the streets, kissed total strangers and shouted with unrestrained joy.

King David was swept up in the excitement and began to dance with all his might. The King of Israel joined his people leaping wildly and dancing without restraint. Who'd ever seen a king dance like a fool?

As the procession entered Jerusalem, Michal, King David's wife, looked out the window and saw David cavorting with some young women in his wild dance. Michal was a princess before she was the wife of a King, and she knew something about *gravitas* and royal dignity. She considered the king's behavior terribly un-royal and utterly lacking in the decorum required of a king, especially her husband. She despised his over-the-top display of emotion and his out-of-control gyrations.

I think we understand. We can't imagine Queen Elizabeth and President Obama leading a national parade and prancing like a drum major, strutting and leaping about. We can't imagine Pope Benedict and Sandra Day O'Connor out pub-crawling, laughing wildly, gyrating and taking turns dancing on tables. Some things are just not done and should not be imagined.

The story ends with David and Michal in a marital spat.

It's an odd story for the Bible, perhaps even bizarre, don't you think? Odder still, the makers of the Lectionary included the story in lessons to be read every three years in the churches. Why, I wonder, and more importantly, how does this ancient and odd story fit our story on this Lord's Day three thousand years later?

Without overly moralizing the story -- and the biblical stories aren't intended to be moralized - I suppose the story is in some way about leadership-modeling for church and state. *Gravitas* is a good and necessary part of life and leadership. Restraint, decorum, dignity and "weight," all reflections of inner character, do matter in the world -- then and now.

I think there is another side to the story that is, perhaps, more helpful. David's behavior certainly was doubtful, but what motivated that behavior, at least at the beginning, was good and proper. The young, impulsive king was driven by a deep and powerful passion. David loved God passionately. He loved his people with equal passion. He believed in

God's mission on earth with all his heart. He wrote a good number of the Psalms, testimony to his passion for God and nation. Properly managed, that passion motivated David to greatness and propelled Israel to national greatness.

While we expect our religious and national leaders to have *gravitas*, we also expect them to be men and women of deep passion. We expect that passionate commitment to the common good and to our welfare are part of the commonwealth. Energetic, passionate, committed leaders who embody *gravitas* and know how to move the levers of power will inspire followers and often accomplish much.

Lazy, disinterested, or dispassionate leaders will not do. Impulsive, unrestrained and out-of-control persons seldom lead well either – at least in the long term. We want leaders who care deeply about what they lead, the people whom they lead, and the task of leadership.

When we lived in Massachusetts, our governor was well known for his dispassionate, cool manner of governing. In fact, well into his term of office, he admitted he was bored with the job and his disinterest became a matter of criticism in his own party and in the opposition. Shortly he went off to seek other ventures.

We want, and we need, passionate leaders whose passions are managed by *gravitas*. When passion is under proper control and managed by proper ends, our leaders will love us, their people, and inspire hope for our common future.

Several years ago, I attended my denomination's centennial celebration. We were an association of churches with momentum and a good future. The program for the celebration featured a keynote speaker who wonderfully set the stage. With deep but restrained passion, he called on us and the churches to seize the opportunities afforded by our time and place to do something significant for God.

The next night the President of the association spoke. With over 2,000 enthusiastic listeners waiting for inspiration and direction, he set off on a most boring monologue – pretty much in a monotone. There was no energy, no passion, no urgency. You could feel the air go out of the room. What a wonderful opportunity for leadership missed for lack of passion!

About 20 minutes into the speech, my friend Dan leaned over and whispered in my ear, "Tom has this crowd whipped into a frenzy."

My point is simple: passionless organizations don't necessarily die but they certainly achieve rigor mortis. Without inner energy – and that comes from the top – decay is inevitable. Institutional blight is the consequence – a cessation of energy, loss of momentum and little sense of direction. We just keep doing what we've always done – for little or no good reason.

That dynamic is particularly true of the church. We are born of the word of God and formed by the gospel of Christ. No more potent inner dynamic is possible. Yet, with remarkable ingenuity, it seems, congregations manage to drain themselves of any passion while limping along depending on old forms to provide some spark of energy. We ministers are skilled at making the most exciting news in the world boring.

Christian Schwarz, a German minister and social scientist, is interested in what makes congregations healthy. He studied hundreds of European and American churches looking for common vital signs of health. One of the essential signs of health, according to Schwarz, is what he calls "spiritual passion." It's hard to define but when you see it, you know it. It includes energized and enthusiastic worship, an obvious passion in the congregation for God and God's mission on earth, and vital, positive and healthy relationships among the people. And beneath it all beats a heart filled with desire for

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God and God's mission. Healthy churches are devoted to and enlivened by something beyond themselves. Such passion is contagious and such congregations tend to grow.

Passion is a function of leadership, but it is also part of the character of the people who follow them. Spiritual passion begins looking outside our selves to contemplate God and God's salvation. Our future depends on it.

Our Epistle Lesson, Ephesians 1, speaks to spiritual passion. The passage is a long, complicated, and poetic sentence of praise about the wonder and mystery of God and God's ways with the world.

The passage centers in adoration of God, the God beyond our understanding, the one to whom we sing,

Immortal, invisible God only wise,  
In light inescapable, hid from our eyes.  
Most gracious, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,  
Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

That mighty and mysterious God loved us before the worlds were formed. Down the long march of time, God has been seeking all of us lost children. In the middle of time, God sent Jesus to seek and save the lost and bring us home. In Christ God stamped us with the living seal of the Holy Spirit and adopted us as children complete with an eternal inheritance. By word, spirit, and sacrament, God is shaping us into something beautiful.

We live under the smile of God – an experience that calls for a dance!

When we lived in Boston, I often ate lunch on the Boston Common. One of the features of the Common is street preachers. They came in every color, sect and type. But all of them preached with pointed fingers of accusation, angry faces and what seemed to be considerable anger – except one. And no one ever listened.

One man never said a word. He'd show up, put spiritual music in his boom box, and begin to dance gracefully to the music. In lovely gestures and with a beatific smile, he danced with wonderful restraint to the glory of God. He always drew a crowd – and he never said a word. He just danced on.

People of faith live on the edge of mystery. The living God is invested in time and in us. We see but glimpses of eternity, and we experience a mere taste of God's grace and glory. God, the majestic creator, with arms open wide, declares, "I love you. You belong to me. I want to help you on the journey. Come to dinner at my table and let me feed you myself.

That is mystery and it calls for a dance!

Amen.

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