

A Matter of Religious Integrity

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

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My wife will tell you, and I will confirm, I don't dance. If anyone was ever born with two left feet, you're looking at him. I wish I could dance. My wife wishes I could. But I don't dance.

Which makes this story about King David dancing before the Lord all the more intriguing for me. Could King David dance? His wife didn't think so either. In fact, she was scandalized by his dancing. Or was she? Some suggest that she was scandalized all right, but by something else the new king of Israel was doing, something political, manipulative. Would a politician use religion to manipulate his or her constituents? It's not new!

This story about King David dancing before the Lord actually begins in the previous chapter. You may remember that Saul was the first king of Israel. But God rejected Saul and chose David, the son of a shepherd, to be the new king. At age 30, he was actually too young to be president of the United States, but God made him king of Israel, saying, "It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel."

One of the first things young King David did was move the capital back to Jerusalem, the *holy* city of Jerusalem. His army defeated the Jebusites allowing them to move back into Jerusalem. Good political move. David, the text says, became greater and greater. Another enemy, the Philistines, learned that Israel had a new, young king, and they decided to take advantage of his youth and attack. Chapter five ends with this sentence, "David did just as the Lord had commanded him; and he struck down the Philistines from Geba all the way to Gezer."

In other words, it was a rout, and David's reign was off to a great start. He may have been young, he may have been a shepherd, but he was a savvy politician.

One thing was missing. And it was big. It had been missing for 20 years. It was the most sacred symbol in Israel's life. They called it the Ark of the Covenant. Actually, its proper name was the *Ark of the Lord of Hosts Who Is Enthroned Above the Cherubim*. God commanded the people of Israel to build the Ark when they were wandering in the wilderness. I've seen artists' renderings of it. It must have been a sight to behold. It was about four feet long, constructed of acacia wood and covered inside and out with pure gold.

Several years ago one of our late church members, Leonard Mitchum, gave me this block of wood. He said, "Take this. It may be useful one day." Mitch, that day has come. He explained that this is a piece of acacia wood. He called it shittim, which is another name for the acacia tree. This is the kind of wood used to build the Ark of the Covenant and all the furniture in the tabernacle. I'll always treasure this because it came from Mitch.

Three items were stored inside the Ark, each proof of God's care for the people: the two tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments had been engraved, a jar of manna saved from the wilderness, and Aaron's rod that budded as a sign of God's protection. The most foreboding part of the Ark sat on top—two golden cherubim. Now, I'm not talking about the sweet Valentine's Day cherubs with their little bows and arrows. No, these were fierce winged creatures that guarded sacred places. Two golden cherubim were placed on top of the Ark so that their outstretched wings met in the middle. Here's the most important part. God's presence was believed to dwell between the cherubim on the top of the Ark.

Nothing in Israel was more sacred than the Ark of the Covenant. But it wasn't in Israel. Twenty years earlier the Philistines had stolen it. It ended up at the house of a man named Abinadab. David may have been young, he may have been a shepherd, but he was a savvy politician and knew the importance of the *Ark of the Lord of Hosts Who Is Enthroned Above the Cherubim*. Our text says David brought the Ark back to Jerusalem. As the sons of Abinadab carried the Ark back to Jerusalem, back to where it rightfully belonged, David and the people danced before the Lord "with all their might." They sang songs, played lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals. For some

reason it makes me think of a Vacation Bible School skit. They were going wild dancing and singing.

King David then threw a great party. He offered sacrifices. He fed the people. Again he danced before the Lord with all his might. The text says he was wearing only a linen ephod, which was basically Jewish underwear. It was a loincloth. With nothing worn under it. And he was dancing. With all his might. You get the picture.

So did his wife, Michal, who was not at all happy with her husband's crude display. She was King Saul's daughter. She was a princess. She knew how a royal family was supposed to behave. The text says she looked out the window and saw David leaping and dancing, and "she despised him in her heart."

Things are about to get ugly!

When David got home that evening, there was a chill over the king's palace. Michal came out. Her words were sarcastic and cutting:

How the king of Israel honored himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants' maids, as any vulgar fellow might shamelessly uncover himself!

Young King David tried to explain that he was dancing with utter abandon before the Lord. At that moment, nothing else mattered to him, at least so he said. Remember, he was a savvy politician.

Not surprisingly, the chapter ends with this sentence, "Michal the daughter of Saul (and David) had no child to the day of her death."

Here's where this text becomes complicated. Why was Michal so upset? Was it because her husband pranced around in his skivvies and the maids saw him? Was she embarrassed because he made a fool of himself? Was his dancing genuine, or was it just another good political move?

This text is really not about dancing. It is more about the mixing of politics and religion. It is about the use of religious symbols to gain

political power. David's dancing represented the completion of a transfer of power from King Saul to King David. This was a time that did not understand democracy and the orderly transfer of power. Power was taken. Kingdoms were won on a battlefield. So the question theologians have asked of this story is this: was King David's behavior a genuine expression of thanksgiving and joy, or was it a manipulation of the supreme religious symbol of his people for his own political advancement?

This is a hard call for me. It appears to be genuine, but so do some of the commercials we see on television today. Michal's response is awfully harsh, if David's celebration was genuine. Her response doesn't seem to match the offense. Maybe this text wants us to consider that there is a fine line between personal religious devotion and our public display of that devotion. Politicians are mostly good people who want to serve their constituents. That is why most people who go into politics do so. They genuinely want to serve and make things better in their community, state, or the country. This text raises a caution flag for them and for us. The religious symbols of the people must not be used as a bargaining tool for votes. Politicians must not parade before us and try to out-Christian each other in order to get our votes. You and I must be as wise as serpents and as gentle as doves as we evaluate candidates for public office. Our faith must be used for no other purpose than to love the Lord our God and to serve God's people. That is a matter of religious integrity.

Of course, politicians are not the only ones vulnerable to this. I am. We all are. Our Lord taught us to do good in secret, so that our left hand does not even know what our right hand is doing. He challenged us not to call attention to ourselves. Don't blow a trumpet just before you give your offering. No, practice your religion in secret, he said, and our Father, who sees in secret, will reward us. Our faith must be used for no other purpose than to love the Lord our God and to serve God's people. It really is a matter of religious integrity.

Closing Prayer

Lord, you set the example for us. Of integrity. Of purity. Of true righteousness. Help us to follow your example. Amen.