

"The Dance of the Six-Shooter"

(2 SAMUEL 7:11-14 NIV) *"The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you: ¹²When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.*

(PSALMS 89:19-22 NIV) *Once you spoke in a vision, to your faithful people you said: "I have bestowed strength on a warrior; I have exalted a young man from among the people. ²⁰I have found David my servant; with my sacred oil I have anointed him. ²¹My hand will sustain him; surely my arm will strengthen him. ²²No enemy will subject him to tribute; no*

wicked man will oppress him.

(MARK 6:30-34 NIV) *The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. ³¹Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." ³²So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. ³³But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. ³⁴When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.*

Thinking back to the sermon a couple of weeks ago, I guess I never realized how much dancing is in the Bible. There is a dance we didn't talk about then: it's in some of the old western movies you see. It was performed, usually, either in a saloon, or in the street in front of a saloon, in some dusty cattle town "out west"; like "Deadwood", Dakota Territory. The only access to "Deadwood" was by train to the end of the tracks, then overland by stagecoach.

After three dusty days in a hot stagecoach, "Dapper Dudley", dandy dude from Dover, Delaware, disembarks in Deadwood, Dakota, delightfully debonair in his dinky derby, collar still stiffly starched, every pleat perfectly pressed.

Dreadfully, on disembarking in Deadwood, Dakota, Dapper Dudley, dandy dude from Dover, Delaware, is discovered directly by Dirty Dan, disgusting devil from Durango, Colorado (I couldn't find another one in Dakota). Dirty Dan draws his derringer, and discharges a deadly deluge at the dirt under Dapper Dudley's dancing digits. The "Dance of the Six-Shooter".

Now, hang on to that image. We'll get back to it.

The Lord said to David,

"When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever." (2 SAMUEL 7:12-13 NIV)

This describes the deep-seated sense of renewal felt in Israel due to the charismatic leadership of David. But what really counts for the writer of the text is that David embodies in his own flesh God's *astonishing faithfulness* to Israel.

The Psalm in today's lectionary is an embellishment of that same theme; namely, God's profound, unconditional promise to David. And while David's dynasty is

the focus and the demonstration, the real subject still is God's faithfulness. In later generations, many of the Jewish rabbis missed that point.

I've noted in the last two weeks that David was known as "a man after God's own heart" (Acts 13:22). I've also indicated that David was the model for "Messiah", who would be known as "Son of David". Today's Gospel moves us from the eloquent poetry of the Psalmist to the concreteness of Jesus: dusty feet, sweating brow, aching back, and all. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise to David.

Jesus had sent the twelve out to preach and teach, to cast out demons and to heal. Now they've returned. They were exhausted, but full of enthusiasm over the wonderful things that had happened to them. It was a time for rest, for sharing and reflecting on their experiences.

But crowds interrupted—pushing, shoving—like any crowd out to see the Pope, the president, or a favorite rock star: elbowing each other to catch a glimpse, or hear a word, or maybe to touch Jesus. What Jesus and the disciples really needed was rest, and time to organize and internalize their learnings; but the crowds...

There was teaching to be done, and healing; and the crowds linger; and it's time to eat. So, Jesus feeds 5,000 with essentially a couple of tuna sandwiches.

But sensing his disciples' fatigue, and knowing his own, he manages to slip away with his disciples and head across the lake to a private spot for retreat and rest. But on the other side, the crowds have run around the lake, and are there waiting; so Jesus teaches, and heals, and guides them.

The gospel claims that Jesus is "greater than David"; but he does the same work as David: making life new; restoring humanity and bringing about a new, united community which cancels our deepest divisions. In fact, our divisions in church, race, gender, economics and nation are shameless and frivolous, given God's intention.

What is strikingly clear in the gospel is that where Jesus goes...

...life is renewed: guilt and shame wiped away, and the experience of divine forgiveness enables us to forgive each other and to discover our common identity, not as holy or righteous people, but as the community of the forgiven and redeemed.

...humanity is restored: dignity and justice and self-respect are available in equal measure to all people; and there is peace because people are more aware of their similarities as children of God than of their differences. Hope emerges out of poverty and squalor; initiative and purpose replace hopelessness (which is confused with *laziness* or *shiftlessness* by some who never have experienced, and who have no comprehension of, the devastating effects of poverty and racial oppression.)

I think, by implication, the reverse also is true: "Where life is not new and renewing, where humanity continues unrenewed, there is evidence of the absence of Jesus. And, of course, I've just described where we live. All around us—within our reach and within our ability to make a difference—is poverty and squalor and hopelessness; violent crime takes away our humanity and sends us behind locked doors; humanity is degraded by pornography and racism and sexism.

We see in today's gospel what happens when Christ is present: People are drawn irresistibly to where Christ is, bringing their questions and their pain and their needs and their unfair demands. Maybe that's why many in the church resist a

full commitment: the demands are so heavy. They intrude and interrupt our plans.

Few can handle those kinds of distractions with the grace and compassion of Jesus. In fact, it may be better to read this story not from the perspective of Jesus but from the perspective of the crowd; those whose frantic and unfocused life desperately seeks an answer. Henry David Thoreau said that most people live lives of "quiet desperation."

Jesus seems never put off by our distractions, by our constant need for his compassion and teaching. This text affirms his extraordinary availability. But that should come as no surprise. He is "Son of David" the embodiment, in the flesh, of the incomprehensible faithfulness of God.

It is tempting to leave it at that: to dodge the bullets by shrugging our shoulders and saying, "What do you expect? I'm just human. Jesus was "Son of God." But somehow, we know we can't get away with that. The gospel not only ministers to us; it also calls us to ministry—even to the unruly, the rude, and the undeserving who push their way into our lives, interrupting our rest, our learning, our plans; distracting us from the true focus of our calling. How do we respond to the demand?

The gospel text offers a striking contrast to an earlier scene at Nazareth, where, Mark says, "Jesus could do no mighty work"; and where "he was amazed at their unbelief" (6:1-6).

And this is where "The Dance of the Six-Shooters" comes back into the picture; only now it is some elements of Christianity doing the dancing, avoiding the accusing bullets directed at our feet, not so much by evil people as by people who also call themselves "Christian", but who, rather than drawing people to Christ, are repelling them, and giving all other Christians a bad name.

But, in today's gospel, here beside the lake, there are no distractions to Jesus' ministry and power, because there's no indecision about who he is or what he's about—nothing to prevent their openness to his ministry. He's able to heal them and teach them, to fill them and meet their every need, simply because they made following him the most important priority in their life.

And in forsaking all else to follow after Jesus [*AND, PLEASE: DON'T HEAR ME NECESSARILY EQUATING FOLLOWING JESUS WITH PARTICIPATING MORE FULLY IN THE ACTIVITIES OF THE CHURCH! THAT'S PART OF IT; BUT FOLLOWING JESUS ISN'T JUST A "CHURCH" THING. IT'S A "LIFE" THING!*] And in forsaking all else to follow Jesus—even if only for that moment—even if for reasons that were unworthy (Jesus said to the crowds, "You didn't come after me because I have the words of life, but because you got a free lunch!" But he taught them, anyway. He healed them, anyway.

In forsaking all else to follow after Jesus—even if only for that moment—even if for reasons that are unworthy—we became beneficiaries of the immeasurable faithfulness of God—we become more and more like him; and we actually can come to believe that, what seems like a doorway to obligation and burden is really nothing less than a doorway to a sense of fulfillment and blessing; it's the doorway to the kingdom of God.