

JESUS AND ROBERT DUNCAN: LORDS OF THE DANCE
JOHN 17: 1-5, 20-26; ROBERT DUNCAN – “THE DANCE”
AUGUST 3, 2003
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This is the last of our series of Jesus and the poets. What is intriguing to me is the common ground both share. The common life poets and Jesus call us to live.

Today Robert Duncan and the dance.

The last time Carol and I danced was a wedding reception, this summer. The band was fantastic...played all the great dance tunes from the 60s on. People filled the dance floor. One middle aged man was so lost in what he was doing he was a one-man show. A crowd of people gathered around him. He whirled and twirled. Perhaps an accountant by day. But he was certainly a whirling dervish that night.

Carol and I sang with the band. There was this refrain: “woo, hoo” Every time the band sang “woo, hoo” dancers sang arms raised, “woo, hoo.” We were lost in the spirit of the dance. Savoring the gift of it all...the cool summer evening, under a big tent, hundreds of people letting go, having fun, not worrying about how they looked.

The dance is what we are talking about today. It’s what Jesus talks about to his followers: “As you Father are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us...I in them and them and you in me, that they may become completely one.”

Jesus invites you and me to get up and dance. Jesus says, if you want to follow me you have to learn how to dance. God is the dance. God is in me and I am in God and we are in each other. If you live in me I will live in you and the world will see the glory of God in our oneness, our dancing.

That’s what it felt like dancing that night. Like we were one. All of us. People of all ages. Some we knew, some we didn’t. But each of us letting the music course through our bodies. Arms, legs, torsos moving to the music.

Something like Robert Duncan depicts in an early poem entitled, “The dance.”ⁱ

The dance
from its dancers circulates among the other
dancers. This
would-have-been feverish cool excess of
movement makes
each man hit the pitch co-
ordinate.

Lovely their feet pound the green solid meadow.
The dancers
mimic flowers – root stem stamen and petal
Our words are,
our articulations, our measures.
It is the joy that exceeds pleasure....

Robert Creeley, perhaps America’s finest living poet, once said “Robert Duncan was the master, more than any of us, of the dance.”

Robert Duncan was born in California. Adopted and raised in Oakland. His parents were intellectuals. Spiritualists. Interested in the occult.

Duncan’s heart and soul were ripe for the Romantic spirit. He once referred to the Englishman artist/poet William Blake as his spiritual father.

Duncan was prolific. His poetry spans nearly forty years and more than fifteen volumes. Because he died in the late 80s his literary star is still rising.

In fact, a complete collection of his poetry and letters will be published this fall by Stanford University Press edited by Robert Bertholf, curator of the world-renowned Poetry Collection at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

Duncan's visit and sermon preached here at Westminster in 1982 on spirituality and poetry is an honored moment in the life and ministry of this congregation and its dedication to the arts.

I would be remiss if I did not say Duncan is not an easy poet to understand. In the tradition of romantic, spiritualist poetry – his symbols and imagination are rich and deep.

The metaphor of the dance sums up his art as well as the life Jesus calls us to live. The way Duncan approached poetry, which is the way I believe Jesus calls us to approach our lives, is to remove our egos so that the Spirit can lead us.

I don't mean becoming nameless, faceless people. I mean letting God lead you through your life. Duncan felt that he was a channel of the holy life force to which he opened his life and which spoke through him.

The result of opening your life like that to God, to the Dance, to the Spirit is deep community between you and the Creator. Deep intimacy. Deep trust.

If you have ever done a trust walk you know what this is like. One person is blind-folded and led by a partner. The one blind-folded must have complete trust in the leader. That's what Duncan and Jesus are saying. You have to have complete trust in God, in the dance and where it leads you.

Where it leads is not just deep relationship with God but connectedness to all of life. The dance makes all things one. The joy that exceeds pleasure.

In his poem "Mirrors" Duncan weaves these themes together:

As God is a Oneness of all things in turn,
A being in touch, so that
in the moving mountain there was a god-ness,
in the sky flashing mirror there was a god-ness,
in the hush of the house where my father died, a god-ness,
Where a likeness of shadow
fell away, a residual, from the unlikely brilliance
that entered and took on raiments of lasting
intimations....ⁱⁱ

God is one. Life is one. The goal of the poet and the believer is to see and embrace the oneness of life. No one is an island. All are connected.

Duncan quotes the Gospel of St. John of Ephesus, where Christ tells John, "If thou givest ear to my round dance, behold thyself in me the speaker."ⁱⁱⁱ

Indeed, the poetic words of this morning's gospel are circular, difficult to pin down and reason out, moving in a round dance of God, Christ, believer.

Like children in a meadow, hands held encircled, dancing as one.

The word Duncan used for this was “inbinding.” “Inbinding,” he said, “mirrors a process [of] returning to [the] roots of first feeling.”

Poets and philosophers locate this return to first feeling, to the beginning of consciousness and imagination, the beginning, therefore, of life in music.

The drum beat pulse of humans and mammals. The low-frequency OM that undergirds all of life. Duncan writes:

In the noise the yearning goes toward tones
because a world in melody appears
increasing longing towards stations of fullness
to release from memory a passionate order:

the inbinding, the return,
where certain vital spirits of an eternal act
are bound to be present,
echoes there in octaves of suffering and joy.

The inhabitants of Love, the inhabitants of Light,
that were Eros and Psyche,

that was Christ at the intersection of two lines,
is each melos of the melody, limbs of the tree are^{iv}

The suffering of Christ on the tree, on intersecting lines of the cross was, said Duncan where the dance inevitably, inexorably leads.

Why? Because it was to that suffering that the dance led God’s son the Christ. Into and beyond the face of death and forces of darkness the dance leads. You can’t go there if you don’t get your ego out of the way, if you don’t trust, if you are worried about failing or how you will look or what others will think.

If you’re like me, a cautious dancer, you have looked out on dance floors and wished you could be there with everyone else, free, uninhibited, letting the Spirit lead you. The good news this morning is you can. It’s a choice.

Maybe it was what Robert Duncan was thinking when he penned these lines,

Wait for me, I said, I’ll dance
wherever you are to be to where I am
a round
I’ll dance the shambles of the year
round the Christ in the Abattoir.^v

So come to the table.

Only the dance that defies death overcomes death.

If you are a buttoned down Presbyterian, if you are weary and heavy-laden today, Jesus and Robert Duncan say let the dance give you life. Amen.

Endnotes:

ⁱ Robert Duncan, "The Dance," from The Opening of the Field (New York: New Directions, 1960) 8,9

ⁱⁱ Duncan, *ibid.*, 86.

ⁱⁱⁱ Personal email correspondence from Robert J. Bertholf, referencing an article by Max Pulver which Duncan cited.

^{iv} Duncan, *ibid.*, "Crosses of Harmony and Disharmony," 44.

^v Duncan, *ibid.*, "The Inbinding," 86.