

WHAT'S ON YOUR DANCE CARD IN 2022? Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-14; Psalm 147; John 1:1-18;

Growing up in Taiwan, I attended a missionary school made up of many conservative Christians, so dancing was forbidden. But in Bible class we read how dancing was a way of expressing joy, praise, & worship. There were not many chances to go dancing. So, when one came up, a friend and I could not pass it up. We were curious why our parents and the school were so set against dancing. Of course, we got caught so my mother confronted me, and we had a conversation.

I argued that King David danced. Some in the crowd on Palm Sunday had to be dancing. The Israelites danced and sang after crossing the Red Sea and after winning battles. I pointed out to my mother the Bible has people dancing on several occasions. Psalm 149:3, says, "Let them praise his name with dancing & make music to him with timbrel & harp." If you had a similar conversation with your parents, you know how the conversation went. The upshot of our conversation was that I agreed to live by my parents' rules, but when I left home, I would go dancing.

The reality is, I didn't do much dancing when I left home, although I did when I had a chance. Going to a Mennonite University didn't help. But the theme of dancing has always stuck with me. It's used as a metaphor for many things.

There is a book titled, *Dance of the Kobzar*, which ties the history of Bluffton University, a man named John Klassen, and a musical together. My father and two of my children attended this school. There is the wonderful book titled, *Dancing in the Dark*, which is about a sister grieving the death of her brother. Over the years the image of dancing has been used in a variety of ways, to express a variety of emotions and events in life.

When it comes to the Christian life, I compare my relationship with God as a dance. The Almighty is the steady partner and I'm the one

who chooses to dance closely or from a distance and sometimes even by myself. At times I haven't even been on the dance floor.

Favorite verses of mine are Psalm 30, 11 & 12. Here is the Message version. "You did it: you changed wild lament into whirling dance; You ripped off my black mourning band and decked me with wildflowers. I'm about to burst into song: I can't keep quiet about you. God, my God, I can't thank you enough."

To me this verse summarizes what happens in a person's life when they turn their life over to Jesus. Wailing and sackcloth become dancing and joy. Which also involves singing and giving thanks forever. To me the harmonious and rhythmic movement of the body in sheer exuberance is a great way to express oneself. Watching a young child, barely standing on their feet, bopping up and down to music, causes us to smile.

The origin of dancing is probably our natural tendency to wave our arms, to make faces and to shift our bodies as we talk. Our body language is just as important as words when we converse. Just try talking for an hour with your hands in your pockets. Strong emotions are always expressed by various body motions, and sometimes by deliberately not being expressive.

As we become sophisticated, we have lost this element of worship. There are things tied to dancing that have the potential for harm, so many Christians have totally written off dancing. We have examples of inappropriate dancing in the Bible, often relating to worship of false gods, like when Aaron made the golden calf for Israel. I know the arguments for Christians not dancing is tied to activities that lead us into temptation.

But all religions have conscious devoted joy, through various kinds of body motion, to express themselves in worship. Around the world, dancing is a way of expressing religious truths & feelings. Some dances are grave, serious, & solemn. Others are exuberant. Many religious dances are carefully choreographed.

Others are wild and free. Rose and I had two expressive dancers at our wedding.

Social dancing is found in many cultures as a pleasant diversion. We watch ethnic dancing like the Irish step, various kinds of Russian dancing, ballroom dancing, boogie wogy dancing, and so on. I suspect some of us have participated in square dancing or circle games and danced at weddings. Dancing has been one of those taboos most of us flirt with on occasion.

Various words are used in Hebrew and Greek to describe skipping, gay and merry movement, whirling about, to show agility, to leap in dancing, and so on. The Hebrew language has at least 8 verbs to describe the idea of dancing, leaping, circling or expressive movement. The Bible uses dancing to describe the joyous opposite of mourning. The well-known text of Ecclesiastes 4 tells us there is “a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.” (Verse 3) Dancing was a prominent feature at religious feasts and in some regular processions.

Our scriptures today catalog, in various ways, the abundant goodness of God which cause us to physically dance or metaphorically dance. How can we name and celebrate God’s blessings among us as a congregation, especially while looking back over what may have been a difficult 2021?

This Advent we have been challenged to hope, peace, joy, and love. We have been encouraged to dare to dream. Today, we dare to imagine joining in God’s dance of love and light. A good picture is Jesus’ parable of the prodigal. When the younger son returns, he is embraced by his father, clothed in the best robe. They celebrate with “music and dancing.” (Luke 15:22-25).

Jeremiah 31 describes Israel gathered after exile, the blind, the lame, the children, the pregnant mothers, gathered in from the farthest places, and God turns their “mourning into joy.” “The young women rejoice in the dance,

and the young men and the old shall be merry” (v. 13). They have been saved & throw a party!

Psalm 147 is another psalm of praise for God’s peace and blessing. Verse 1 instructs, “Praise the LORD. How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him!” Verse 7 reminds us, “Sing to the LORD with grateful praise; make music to our God on the harp.” Praise and music are a form of dancing!

Ephesians 1 is a lengthy, mostly single sentence in Greek, describing the lavish blessings of God in Christ. It is as if God has poured these out on us at a great feast and celebration: we are chosen to be holy in love; we are destined to be adopted as God’s children; and more.

In the prologue to John’s gospel, **John 1**, we have a description of “God’s dance” as a “dance of light.” Light in John’s writings symbolizes God’s presence or “glory,” God’s “grace and truth,” revealed in Jesus (1:1-4, 14-18). This divine light overcomes the shadows of this world. It brings light to that which is not “grace and truth.” Jesus brings us this light of God, and we are invited to embrace in this divine light. This enables us to celebrate as full-fledged children of God.

Let’s use dancing as a metaphor for us. I invite you to imagine with me that dancing helps us reflect on our relationship with God’s church at North Star. Let’s look at ourselves, at what God desires for us & use dancing to help us do some New Year’s self-reflection through questions.

Let’s use the image of dancing to reflect on our church priorities for 2022. I am not going to ask them all because they are in your bulletins. And there are questions in this sermon.

Remember what you wrote last fall when Josh asked us to list what in church life gives us joy? What will your dance be in 2022? What will North Star’s dance be in 2022? Will we each dance on our own? Can we dance in step with each other?

Will we be slow dancing or fast dancing or something in between?
Will you have to be dragged around the dance floor or will you lead?
Will you sit out the dance?
What will our dance be like with the changes we know will occur, much less the unknown changes in our church life?
When we look back on this next year, & ask, how was the dance? What will the answer be? How would God describe your and our dance?
How would you frame some questions we should ask about our personal spiritual lives, our congregational priorities, the Reimagination process & dancing as we enter a new year?
Most of all, what will our dance with Jesus be like in 2022 and beyond?

For example, as we soon hear the proposed budget, will it excite us to dance, or will you keep our money off the dance floor? A budget is a goal statement; a mission testimony; a declaration of faith. A budget is an action commitment. A church's proposed budget is saying - these things are what God is leading us to prioritize. And God will help us reach the budget goal and even more.

So, a key question is, does our budget cause God to dance? Will Jesus call out to the angels & saints, "Get over here. You must see my people at North Star Mennonite. They have these plans to further my Kingdom and to glorify my name. They are my people! Look at their budget, which is a plan on how they are going to use their energy, money, time, & ministry in 2022. It looks wonderful! Isn't it great they have a plan to carry out their commitment to me? Let's dance with joy!"

I suspect some of you are anxious to get a new pastor and that's causing you to dance. Some of you may be dancing because I'll be leaving you. That's good. This is a planned and positive change in our congregational life. But the key question is, will Jesus be dancing with us in our decision making about a new pastor? This is where prayer is key. Many of you have been

praying - which is a way of dancing with God. Our prayer dancing must become specific. Our human discernment needs to tie into our dance with Jesus, so we are dancing together in unity with him and each other.

Along with a possible new pastor is the question, are you committed to dance with him? Are you willing to let him lead the dance? Will you help her implement the dance? Because dancing alone, while physically beneficial, is not as much fun as dancing as a team. So, the question must be asked, what are you willing to do to make sure you are dancing with him or her a year from now and six years from now? Maybe even sixteen years from now! How can you as a church, the next pastor, the Holy Spirit, and the pastoral team, dance together in a joyful, energetic, productive way?

As we plot our next steps what concrete actions, practices and habits will we adapt, so we move more deeply into the Guiding Ideas from our Congregational Reimagining Process? Just setting a budget and getting a new pastor are the easy goals. Following God's dance for us is a greater task because we will be asked to attempt and embrace some changes as well as be on the dance floor.

2022 might bring another change, which is a new structure. Hopefully our budget and all job descriptions will reflect this structure. I hope we will develop some goals out of the Reimagining process that direct our dancing and help us dance well. How can we plan for the next year or more, so we strengthen our vision / mission statement?

It announces to our Creator, to our community & to ourselves our purpose, priorities & values. It's beginning reads, "Like a tree planted by a life-giving stream, North Star Mennonite Church is rooted & growing in God's saving grace, ongoing healing, & everlasting hope through Jesus Christ. We commit ourselves to living a Christ-centered faith that shapes who we are." The whole statement, with its 11 points, should be reflected in our decision

making, our planning, our budget, our personal and congregational life, and our witness.

Also, being Mennonites, means: We follow the teachings of the Bible in the Mennonite tradition. We value worship for its spiritual renewal, the leading of the Holy Spirit, and fellowship. We advocate Jesus' teachings of grace, peace, justice, service, and non-resistance. We empower mission work. We regard Christian education as a foundation for growing in faith. We believe unity and congregational participation is essential for church growth, health, & wellbeing.

We strive to make Jesus smile and dance by being a welcoming church, valuing our community, regarding all people as important to God, desiring to meet people where they are, and believing that together we can connect one another to Jesus Christ. As we live these values well, we dance. As more of us fully join in this dance, and guiding principles, our dance flows together, we feel energized and joyful. Our dance attracts attention. Most of all, as we get better at dancing God's values, the Creator is worshipped and honored.

Our focus statement for today says: Imagine a dance that includes all peoples and nations coming together, praising God for Jesus. Just imagine: God chooses and lavishes grace on us, a dancer who is both intimate and inclusive, living among us, revealing God's glory in the Word made flesh. When the dance focuses on the Lord of the Dance, life becomes more fulfilling.

Jesus in Matthew 6:33 instructs us, "Seek first his kingdom, and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." In other words, when our dance with God and Jesus his Son, with the help of the Holy Spirit, is going well, the dance gets even better. When we put God's kingdom first in our lives, and his way of living takes priority in our lives, then our dance with God really becomes fulfilling.

I invite you to make a New Year's Resolution to join in the dance here at church. Keep North

Star on your dance card for 2022. I believe the term dance card is an old term where people knew the dances that were coming up and so a man asked a woman to reserve a particular dance and the woman wrote it down on a card. This was a sign of acceptance and commitment to dance together.

Psalms 149, verse 3 tells us, "Let them praise his name with dancing, and make music to him with tambourine and harp." I invite you to get more involved in the dance through your participation. Give more from an attitude of gratitude. Give more of your prayers, money, encouragement, attitude, energy, & time. Make sure the Almighty and North Star is a greater priority on your dance card. Come & Dance in 2022 like you've never danced before.

A while back a song sat on the top of the charts for a long time. While not a religious song, I find it very religious. I believe it is such a popular song because it's a reminder and an invitation to make the right choices, to get involved, to not short circuit your own life, in short, to dance. Please use your imagination as you listen to these words. Match the words with your dance with Jesus.

The singer wrote, "The first time I heard these lyrics, my children immediately came to mind. These are the things I want for them in life. I remember thinking, 'If they understand the meaning of this lyric when they're grown, I'll have done my job as their mother.'" For me, this song expresses my desire for North Star. Imagine with me that this is a message from the Almighty.

It's a life-affirming song with an uplifting, time-less message. It's based on the narration of a mother expressing the wish that her children will step out and embrace life and take a chance on love and faith. Please listen to this song and imagine God is inviting you to put him on your dance card and make him a priority in 2022.

CD – Lee Ann Womack – I hope you never lose your sense of wonder.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-KFAa40kZ30>