

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
February 6, 2011
Matthew 5:13-20

Epiphany 5, Year A

Airport horror stories are an easy topic of conversation since so many people have had a horrible time getting stuck in an airport. Some of the airport problems are enough to try the patience of a monk. There is an Episcopal monk named Curtis Almquist who writes about it:

“Not long ago I was flying home to Boston from the West Coast. The weather was stormy, the turbulence had been nauseating, and flights had been delayed and canceled left and right. Late in the afternoon the skies were definitely not friendly, nor were my fellow passengers. I had just gotten off one late plane, hustling in a kind of anxious daze to get to my next gate, where I both hoped and feared that my connection would also be late. Then the most amazing thing occurred.

“Here in an airport lounge are half a dozen couples, dressed to the hilt, as handsome as models in *Vanity Fair*. . . . Actually they are dancers, ballroom dancers. Amid the cacophony of airport announcements and all the bustling and bumping that goes on, these six or so couples are waltzing to the music of a string quartet. I stop dead in my tracks, as does most everyone else. People's luggage simply slides down their legs to the floor. They watch, mesmerized, beaming with delight. A man standing near to me—a high powered executive type—has tears streaming down his cheeks. It is that beautiful: the music, the form and flow, and the gorgeous grace of these dancers. It is such an absolutely arresting juxtaposition to the organized chaos in the airport that afternoon.

“It comes to an end, this waltz, only for one of the women dancers to walk through the empty space created by us travelers who had circled around this angelic troupe of dancers. This woman walks to the edge of the circle to a man, simply another traveler, a guy with a plane to catch. He looks as much a mess as the rest of us. He, too, had been absolutely arrested by the dancing. It was more than dancing, it was the choreographed joy-of-the-moment. The woman dancer whispers something to this traveler. Very curious. What is this? He sets his briefcase on the floor and allows himself to be escorted into the center of the improvised dance circle. The music begins

again, and within seconds this man, a fellow stranger along the way, starts waltzing with this dancer before us all.

“It was a stunning moment, resplendent with energy and flow and delight. It simply soared with the movement of a crescendo. Our fellow traveler seized the opportunity, and it *so* smacked of life. It was pure joy! The spontaneous and thunderous applause we all gave completely drowned out the sorry weather that afternoon.”

I think those are the kinds of qualities Jesus has in mind when he says “You are the light of the world. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

There is a sense of unfettered naturalness about it. If you are a dancer, you dance. If you are a light, you shine. You don’t do it because of a sense of moral obligation; you do it because it’s the natural fulfillment of who you truly are. When dancers do what brings them joy, it brings joy to everyone who sees them. When people love in a way that brings them joy, it brings joy to everyone who sees them.

That’s not to say living this kind of authentic joyful life is easy. Following your bliss means deciding not to follow your critic. Think of all the rules these dancers are breaking, all the critical voices that say things like, “You are dressed inappropriately.” “People will think you’re crazy.” “This is an airport, not a dance floor” The woman dancer breaks the rules about gender roles: nice girls don’t touch strangers in airports, women don’t take the initiative to ask a man to dance, if a couple are dancing the man is supposed to lead.

Jesus knew that the joyful love he wanted to show the world would get him in trouble. People told him he was acting inappropriately, violating the Sabbath, touching people he wasn’t supposed to touch, treating women in ways that violated all the gender roles, taking the lead instead of submitting to authority, and people thought he was crazy. But showing people the extravagant love of God was more important than any of that. Jesus came to tell people “I am the light of the world.” Jesus also came to tell people, “You are the light of the world.” Yes, you.

An entire roomful of darkness cannot extinguish a light. The light just keeps shining no matter how much darkness is around it. The light illuminates the darkness simply by doing what a light does: shine. Shining is the fulfillment of what a light is. A shining light isn't affected by the darkness around it; instead the light shines and it illuminates the darkness around it.

The reason the dancers in the airport are so appealing is that they joyfully break through our assumptions about our unhappiness. We assume that our circumstances make us stressed and frustrated and disappointed. We assume that other people make us angry or sad. These dancers just don't buy it. For the dancers, nobody makes them anything. The grumpy, irritable, complaining, criticizing passengers don't make them upset. The bad weather doesn't make them gloomy. The delays don't make them worried or disappointed. The dancers are who they are. They do what they do. They dance.

We assume that circumstances and other people make us react in certain ways, that there isn't any other option. The dancers show us there is another option. Plenty of other options. People will tell you airport delays are miserable. If they thought about it at all, they would say, "when everything's so horrible, you can't go around dancing in airports." So we need dancers to show us, "Actually, you can."

It's why we so often struggle with the words of Jesus. We think, "I can't just forgive that person after all the things he's done to me. He made me feel so horrible." So we need Jesus to show us, "Actually, you can." We think, "I can't just stop worrying about all the things that could go wrong in the future." So we need Jesus to show us, "Actually, you can." We think, "I can't just love these obnoxious people." So we need Jesus to show us, "Actually, you can."

You may be thinking, "Yeah, but I'm not a ballroom dancer. I don't have that kind of natural grace and beauty. I don't have that training. I don't have fancy dancing clothes." But remember that the dancer walks up to "another traveler, a guy with a plane to catch. He looks as much a mess as the rest of us." And she whispers in his ear. And he puts his briefcase down and follows her. And simple as that, within seconds, he is a dancer.

That's what discipleship looks like. We see Jesus walking up to a fisherman, a guy with fish to catch. He looks as much a mess as the rest of us. Jesus talks to him. And the guy puts down his nets and follows him. And within seconds, he is a disciple.

The guy in the airport appears to be a stressed out traveler with a plane to catch. But this woman sees that he is a dancer. He dares to believe her, he dares to follow her, he dares to dance with her. And voila! He IS a dancer.

A life of faith is dancing with Jesus. I am not making this up. Jesus himself says the kingdom of heaven is a wedding reception that he invites us to. What do people do at wedding receptions? They dance. Jesus tells us that God is like the father who welcomes home the prodigal son. Jesus tells us the older brother is upset about this welcome once he hears the music and dancing.

This guy in the airport didn't know he was a dancer. He thought he was a stressed out traveler with a plane to catch. But the woman dancer knew.

What she knew is what Jesus knows, and what Jesus wants us to know. Who you are is not determined by the circumstances you're in. Who you are is not determined by where you happen to be. Who you are is not determined by the people around you. Who you are is not determined by what you're wearing. Who you are is determined by who you are. You are the light of the world.

Jesus is telling you: You are the light of the world. Let your light shine. Let your joy shine. Let your love shine. Let your courage shine. Let your gentleness shine. Let your forgiveness shine. Let your faith shine. Let your hope shine. It's who you are, and it's beautiful.

It may seem that good works and virtues are things we have to work hard to achieve. But Jesus comes at it from a different direction. Jesus describes our goodness as something that is emanating from our souls like beams of light shining from a light. Its not like we have to strive to become something we're not. Jesus says, "You ARE the light of the world. LET your light shine." Jesus talks about getting rid of the barriers that hide your light from view. But Jesus wants you to know that you are the light of the world. Let your light shine.

The biggest barriers to letting your light shine are the little voices of the critic that say, "Yeah but I can't...." If you hear those voices that say "Yeah but" feel free to give

that critic a kick in the yeah but. If a beautiful woman holds out her arms to you and whispers in your ear, “dance with me” do you really think the best response is to stand there and argue the matter with her? Just dance, for heaven’s sake.

And when Jesus tells you “You are the light of the world” do you really think the best response is to argue with him? “Oh no, really I’m not very good at... Yeah but I can’t...I don’t really know how to...I’ve always had trouble with...” What determines who you are is...who you are. God is the one who created you. God knows who you truly are. God knows you are the light of the world, and God wants you to know that too. None of the barriers are helpful. Just let your light shine, for heaven’s sake.

Even if you thought you weren’t a dancer, once you begin to dance, you are a dancer. Even if you thought people would think you’re crazy, once you’ve waltzed, what happens? “The spontaneous and thunderous applause we all gave completely drowned out the sorry weather that afternoon.”

“You are the light of the world. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

You can tell the stories of all the horrible things that happened to you when you were stuck in the airport. But it doesn’t have to be that way. You can live so that people tell stories about you that include the phrase, “Then the most amazing thing happened.” The sacred texts keep giving us stories that in one way or another include the phrase, “Then the most amazing thing happened.” When people interact with Jesus, the most amazing things happen. There are as many ways to do this as there are people in the world.

If you remember nothing else from this sermon, remember this. No matter what situation you find yourself in, tell yourself what Jesus tells you, “You are the light of the world.” And then ask yourself, “How can I let my light shine?” You might be amazed at what happens. You might even amaze the monks!

(Quote from “Joy” in The Twelve Days of Christmas by Curtis G. Almquist, Cowley Publications)