



the empty bell

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*Dance Around of Love  
of Consciousness*

A sermon preached by Dr. Robert A. Jonas

St. Francis in the Foothills  
United Methodist Church  
Tucson, Arizona

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## Dance Around of Love

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St. Francis in the Foothills United Methodist Church  
4625 E. River Road  
Tucson, Arizona

March 6, 2011

**B**rothers and sisters in Christ: Good morning. I'm so happy to be here with you, and I find it inspiring to preach in a church named after St. Francis. I am grateful to my friend, Frank Williams, for inviting me.

I should tell you straight away that today is my birthday, and that is important because soon after my birth I was baptized at First United Methodist Church in Wausau, Wisconsin. Later on I guess I went astray -- I was raised as a Lutheran, was formed as a Roman Catholic Carmelite, and then was deeply influenced by Buddhism. These days I call myself a contemplative Christian, and my wife is an Episcopal priest. Well, this morning I come home to my Methodist roots, and the pastor who baptized me 64 years ago is probably rejoicing in heaven.

The truth is, I admire the faith and energy of the founders of Methodism, John and Charles Wesley. In my childhood I spent more time outdoors in the forests, farmlands and lakes of northern Wisconsin than I did indoors. Perhaps that's why I've always been fascinated with John Wesley, who traveled four or five thousand miles a year by carriage or horseback--often alone in the wilderness --to share his faith with others.<sup>1</sup> I like to imagine him riding alone, feeling the breeze on his face, hearing the songs of woodland birds and the clip-clopping of the horse, inhaling the scent of marsh grass and pine needles, and always intent on seeing the face of Jesus not only in other people, but also in the natural world around him. I'm told that John Wesley often sang in the wilderness from sheer joy. He was gifted with an extraordinary capacity to see, hear, smell, and sense the Creator in every creature that he met along the way.<sup>2</sup>

*The Selected Works of John and Charles Wesley* sits on a bookshelf near my desk, and for many years it has given me food for thought. Listen to this hymn fragment from Charles:

*Ah, Lord! -- thou art within that sigh,  
Hear thyself within me, pray.  
Hear in my heart thy Spirit's cry,  
Mark what my laboring soul would say,  
Answer the deep, unuttered groan,  
And show that thou and I are one.*<sup>3</sup>

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That is what interests me -- his desire to be at one with the Lord. What is it like to be one with Christ, to realize that Christ is within us? And how might that sense of oneness with Christ affect our relationships with other people and the natural world?

A good place to explore that question is the Gospel of John. In today's reading we learn that Jesus' identity, and our identity as Christians, is dynamic and overflowing with mystery. Jesus says that he is *in* God the Father, and that God is *within* him. Jesus tells us that when we love him, he and the Father, God, will come and make their *home within* us. And further, in that mutual love between Jesus and ourselves, Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit to *abide* within us. Such tender words, *abiding* and *home--* words of promise, love and mystery! Somehow God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are *abiding* and *at home*, within us.

St. Paul describes this new identity in his letters. For him, the experience of unity *with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit* was not just an idea, but also a lived experience. In Philippians (2:5ff) he writes, "**Let the same mind be in you** that was in Christ Jesus," and in First Corinthians (2:16), he says that we "**have the mind of Christ.**" Speaking of his own experience, he writes, "**Now not I, but Christ in me**" (Galatians 2:20). What he is saying is that the fullness of God that abides in him also abides within us. We might say that as Christians, we are on a journey to discover our true selves, our true home in God, and that *God-in-us* is who we really are.

Who is this God that dwells within us? In the first centuries after Jesus' death, Christian leaders grappled with this question at the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon, and they came up with an incredible, mind-boggling idea that God, the Holy Source and Father/Mother of all that is, is One, and yet also Three, and that, being a Trinity, God is a dynamic *perichoresis* of love. That's a mouthful of a word -- *perichoresis*. In Greek, *peri* means "around," and *choresis* means "dance." In other words, God is not a static thing, like a noun -- God is more like a verb. God is like a dance, a dance-around of love who appears, for our sake, in three distinct ways.

What we traditionally name the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, St. Augustine called the lover, the beloved, and the love that flows between. And the whole creation is caught up in that dance. In the first instant of creation, at what scientists like to call the Big Bang, and what we might call the Great Dancing Forth, all Creation flared forth from the eternal dance-around of love. The seed of that first Flaring Forth is within us, for, as we learn from the book of Genesis, we are created in the image of God.

We are at one with God, and the dance-around of love is within us--that's what Scripture and tradition are telling us. But how difficult it is to believe that, or to trust that, or to live in a way that expresses that! Where is God within us? Can we see, hear or touch God within us? Probably not. But God is there nonetheless, and most often we need to do a bit of self-spelunking (cave exploration) to find this *perichoresis* of love.

My friend and mentor, Henri Nouwen, used to put it like this: we are the beloved of God. Just as the Holy Spirit came to Jesus during his baptism in the Jordan River, so the Holy Spirit is given to us in our baptism, letting us know who we really are. But it is so easy to forget that we are God's beloved, and

that we participate in this divine dance of love. Just look at how we think of ourselves on an ordinary day.

Henri Nouwen would say that we make three common mistakes in how we understand ourselves.

First, we believe that we are what we do: we ARE our jobs or we ARE what we have accomplished in life. We ARE the list of achievements that we pack into our resume or imagine showing up in our obituary -- maybe the work we've done or the house we've built, the books we've written or the children we've produced.

Or, second, we believe that we are what other people say about us. If they like me, I'm a good person; if they don't like me, I'm a bad person. We can spend inordinate amounts of time trying to be liked, as if we are only a *somebody* if other people approve of us.

And third, we believe that we are what we have: we identify with the things that we possess -- physical things, like our house or car or clothes, or non-physical things, like our opinions. If we stripped away the opinions we cherish about politics or other people, about the economy, the weather, or anything else, who would be then? Would we recognize ourselves if we didn't have our opinions?

So we often make mistakes about our identity: we think that we ARE what we do, what others say about us, what we have, or what we think about ourselves or others.

In response, Henri would thrust out his long fingers, open his eyes wide, and declare, "We are NOT these things. We are NOT what we do, what others say about us, or what we have. Look more deeply and you will see that you are God's Beloved: *that's* who you are, *that's* who I am, that is our essential identity." When we know ourselves as beloved by God, we feel a sense of spaciousness -- our identity is larger than we knew, and we don't have to cling to what we do, or to what others say about us, or to the things that we possess. This is the freedom of Christ, and it is especially challenging to experience it in the midst of a consumerist and celebrity-driven culture that constantly tells us that we have to **buy** more, and **have** more, and **do** more, in order to be loved or worthwhile.

The truth is that God already loves us, and is already within us, and we need spiritual practices that help us to recognize that and to embody that. What spiritual practices help us to know who we really are and to practice the dance-around of love? Perhaps each of us has a unique way to God. When I grew up as a Lutheran in the 1950's and 60's, I was taught that the only sure way to heaven was to read Scripture, to believe in Jesus Christ, to pray and to go to church. But in fact, as I became more grounded in my belovedness, I learned to expect God evenly in all things.

One of the ways that we can come into touch with God's loving presence -- a way that I was not taught in my youth -- is in silent meditation. In fact, sometimes, it is only in silence that we can glimpse the world from the viewpoint of the Holy Spirit within us. You probably know from your own experience that the first thing we notice if we stop talking is that our minds are not quiet. Our minds are a-swirl with memories, opinions, fears, and fragments of conversation, with worries and complaints. It's no wonder, really -- we live in a time of technically-driven multi-tasking, constantly shifting our

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awareness from TV to cell phone, from Facebook to freeway. As the Buddhists say, our minds are like a tree full of monkeys swinging from branch to branch and chattering all the while. But if we can ease our bodies down to a chair, or to a rock in the wilderness, and quiet our minds and hearts, we can sometimes glimpse a much larger reality and experience an inner freedom from our restless, disconnected minds.

What helps the mind grow quiet? We can bring awareness to our breath, and let our awareness rest for a while in the simple sensation of air flowing in and out of our nostrils. Or we can let a sacred word surface in our mind -- maybe the word "Peace" or "Trust" or "Jesus" -- and gently repeat that word for a while in rhythm with our breath, letting it draw us to the divine Presence that is beyond all words. Or we can look at the world around us and turn inwardly to God, asking God, from moment to moment, "Where are you in this? Help me to see with your eyes, and to hear with your ears."

My family and I have been in Tucson for over a week now, and I've thought of St. Francis several times as I've hiked in the Saguaro National Park and in Sabino Canyon, and delighted in the gentle whoosh and zip of hummingbirds flying just inches past my ears at the Sonoran Desert Museum. I've stood still on rocky trails, abiding in mutual gaze with a hawk and with desert warblers, with lizards and snorting javelinas. Such a blessing! St. Francis recognized the Thou of God in animals and birds, in the sun and the stars. Because we are created in the image of a God who IS a dance of I-Thou relationship, we are most ourselves when we participate in that kind of relationship with our fellow humans and with all creatures. We are invited to say to the hawk, the finch, the horse and fish, "I see you, I want to get to know you, and I so appreciate your beauty and your mystery."

As we silently sit, walk, or paddle our way in desert, forest, canyon or river, we can look at the face of a cloud, a cliff, a raptor or a saguaro, and ask "Where are you, dear God, in this?" "Show me your beauty." And then we can wait and listen for something that we have never heard before, something new, something more subtle and yet more powerful and enduring than our tree full of monkeys.

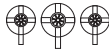
Even though I grew up as a Lutheran, no one ever told me that Martin Luther referred to creation as The Book of Nature. As Christians, we have not one but two sacred books: Holy Scripture and Nature. In fact, sometimes it is when we are in nature that we experience most vividly the divine Presence that St. Augustine called the lover, the beloved, and the love that flows between. We, and all Creation, are part of an ongoing dance of divine love, and we become who we really are when we know that we are caught up in that dance, and that we share in that divine web of relationship. As Jesus says in today's passage from the Gospel of John, we are most ourselves when we know that God is within us, and that all of us are in God.

The poet Mary Oliver is widely known for her attunement to the way that God shines out from within the natural world, and I would like to end with a poem that she wrote about the mystery of the soul. The poem is entitled, "Some Questions You Might Ask."<sup>4</sup>



*Is the soul solid, like iron?  
Or is it tender and breakable, like  
the wings of a moth in the beak of the owl?  
Who has it, and who doesn't?  
I keep looking around me.  
The face of the moose is as sad  
as the face of Jesus.  
The swan opens her white wings slowly.  
In the fall, the black bear carries leaves into the darkness.  
One question leads to another.  
Does it have a shape? Like an iceberg?  
Like the eye of a hummingbird?  
Does it have one lung, like the snake and the scallop?  
Why should I have it, and not the anteater  
who loves her children?  
Why should I have it, and not the camel?  
Come to think of it, what about the maple trees?  
What about the blue iris?  
What about all the little stones, sitting alone in the moonlight? What about roses, and  
lemons, and their shining leaves?  
What about the grass?*

*Amen*



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## Readings for the day (read prior to this sermon):

### Readings from Jesus's Farewell Address in the Gospel of John

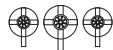
Jesus said, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. . . . On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. . . . Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. . . . Then Jesus cried aloud: "Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. . . . You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. . . . As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. . . . I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. . . ." And, speaking to God, Jesus says, "I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.'" [from John 14:16, 17; 14:20; 14:23; 12:44; 14:28; 15:9; 15:11 ]

### The Created Order as Sacrament (Fr. Henri Nouwen)

When God took on flesh in Jesus Christ, the uncreated and the created, the eternal and the temporal, the divine and the human, became united. This unity meant that all that is mortal now points to the immortal, all that is finite now points to the infinite. In and through Jesus all creation has become like a splendid veil, through which the face of God is revealed to us.

This is called the sacramental quality of the created order. All that is, is sacred, because all that is speaks of God's redeeming love. Seas and winds, mountains and trees, sun, moon, and stars, and all the animals and people have become sacred windows offering us glimpses of God.

*Bread for the Journey*, September 22



### Endnotes

- 1 Wesley, John & Charles. *The Selected Works of John and Charles Wesley: Selected Prayers, Hymns, Journal Notes, Sermons, Letters and Treatises*. Edited, with an Introduction by Frank Whaling, Preface by Albert C. Outler. New York: Paulist Press, 1981, p. 166.
- 2 Ibid, p. 300.
- 3 Ibid, p. 191.
- 4 Mary Oliver, *House of Light* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), p. 1.