

Much to my surprise, I received a phone call as I was driving to the church earlier this week, from a fellow whom I guess you would call the “boy-friend” of my secretary at the church I served outside Chicago prior to Patricia’s and my move here. Both he, a retired medical doctor and self-styled inventor, and the secretary are about my age, so I don’t worry about any scandal involving them.

The call was about a business and patent issue with which I had tried to help him sixteen and seventeen years ago, and when he made a follow-up call a day later, I was sitting at my desk with access to my computer, which functions among other things as where I file documents, and I was able to find at least one that should be of value to him.

At any rate, my former secretary was, I am flattered to say, eager to talk with me, and as I told her, it was a wonderful congregation and I missed them all . . . but I could not help but add, even the mother-of-the-bride who, in that role, had caused me what little grief I had experienced there.

I do not get to perform many weddings any more — look around at your fellow worshippers and you might understand why — and I really enjoy and value and as I have said before, put great emphasis on pre-marital counseling, and weddings are usually a delightful finishing point of that effort.

But every now and then.

As our President tends to say, “at any rate,” the combination of recalling that one wedding experience and our two Scripture readings involving dancing, David’s and that of the daughter of Herod’s wife, Herodias, the young lady we know not from our Gospel reading but from elsewhere as “Salome,” caused me to recall the dancing at a wedding of which I might have spoken before, in which case, I apologize.

It was the wedding of the son of a good friend and former colleague at U.S. Steel in Pittsburgh and his wife, both of whom attended Patricia's and my wedding, but their son's wedding was back when Carol was still alive and she and I attended the wedding and reception as the son married a young woman whom we had not previously met, and whose parents, well . . .

The parents were very experienced and appeared expert, perhaps even competitive, I am not sure, ballroom dancers, and the post-meal reception was really their showing off how they performed — er, danced. And while there were maybe two other couples, apparently similarly skilled, joining them after their first dance or two as what I'll call "music-to-show-off-dancing prowess" music played — and I do not recall whether there was live music or a DJ, — most of the other twenty or thirty or so guests just sat.

Whether the parents of the bride were feeling pressure to appear as truly superior dancers or were merely honestly enjoying themselves, I cannot say, but it was *not joyous* for us not-so-polished dancers.

And then all of a sudden, "Misty" (our song) was played, and Carol and I and most of the other guests jumped up and did our two-steps or box-dances or whatever fox-trot-like slow dancing we could; later there was even jitter-bugging or twisting or whatever.

And when the rest joined in, it came closer to David's dance, which, whether in poor taste or not suitable for a king, was a dance of joy, which Salome's was not.

Indeed, in Oscar Wilde's fictionalization of the story set incredibly well to music by Richard Strauss in the twentieth century, Herodias implores her young daughter to ask for the head of John the Baptizer as the reward promised by Herod for what has come to be known as Salome's "Dance of the Seven Veils." Herod agonizes and ultimately concedes, and the aftermath ultimately leads to her death as she sings to and romances the severed head and kisses its lips. Herod is convinced she has gone mad so that her mother might gain revenge on John, and has her killed on the spot.

Which I guess is a way of saying that dancing does not necessarily bring joy to either viewers nor participants, but . . .

Well, I enjoy that the editors of the Lectionary place these two readings in the same week every three years, but what kind of message, if any, is to be gleaned from either of these stories?

Probably none from the John the Baptizer story, other than that kissing the lips of a severed head may be hazardous to one's health, though that is not in the Gospel reading but in Wilde's play and Strauss's opera; the biblical story created some very creative writing and composing and, indeed, having seen the opera a number of times, some creative staging. Otherwise, it is just a story of the tragic end of John the Baptizer.

But what about the story of David's dancing as the Ark of the Covenant was brought into Jerusalem, and let us focus not so much on David himself, who perhaps over did his act of joy, but on his wife, whose disapproval of David causes her to miss out on the incredible significance of the arrival of that ark of the covenant. (Don't blame her; she had not seen "Raiders of the Lost Ark.") She, the daughter of the first king of the United Kingdom of Israel and Judah and bride of the second, missed out on the excitement *and joy* because she was too busy judging the behavior of her husband.

Missed out because too busy judging the behavior of someone who might have overdone a celebration of joy.

That is not as tragic as Salome's not to mention John's fate, but it is sad nonetheless.

And are we prey to that same self-deprivation? Are we sometimes so critical of others, whether in their expression of joy or anything else, that we miss out on the opportunity for joy presented to us?

Might we not derive more joy from life by being less judgmental — not just for purposes of being aware of the plank in our own eye when we worry about the splinter in another's, to paraphrase Jesus, — by being less judgmental and more open to finding, if not beauty, at least some humor in what goes on around us?

And now I must pause; I thought and still think that there was an eighteenth century or so quote from a Frenchman that, “To the pessimist, life is a tragedy; to the optimist, life is a comedy.” But I could not find this, so maybe my memory was faulty, but the French poet Jean Racine did say, “Life is a comedy for those who think and a tragedy for those who feel,” and, sadly I would add, we too readily feel and belatedly and rarely if at all, *think*.

To feel is indeed, human. But should we perhaps tell ourselves to stop when those feelings are negative, like mine of those dancers, and to think a bit? And if we pause, might there be something we gain?

I admit I am often dismayed by . . . well, let me say if Arizona does not have the worst drivers of any state in the union, it is way ahead of whomever is in third place . . . if I am consumed by observing the failures of others or what is wrong all about me, do I not risk failing to see God? If I as a relatively calm worshipper concentrate on what I might consider the over-wrought joy of a fellow worshipper waving his or her hands above his or her head and shouting, “Alleluia,” might I be missing the Christ who is present within him or her?

And that does not hurt that person; it shortchanges me.

“Wake up and smell the roses” is an old cliché, yet there is some truth. We do not have to be as extreme as David the King apparently was, but if we are as consumed by feelings of what others are doing wrong, as was the wife of David, well, we might miss quite a lot of reason for joy. Joy *and gratitude* for what God has created, joy and

gratitude for what God through Jesus has done for us; joy and gratitude that we can indeed encounter the joy Christ brings by experiencing it in the joy of others.

Enough joy to lead us to dance a bit, but we do not need to be showing off to others nor removing seven veils in the process.

“But wait, John. Might not you have enjoyed that wedding reception more if you just stopped to think and perhaps understand that perhaps the bride’s parents, who after all paid for the affair, wanted not so much to show off, as to have a good time over the joy of their daughter’s big day?”

“What? Overcome negative feelings and think? Are you suggesting that a preacher should practice what he preaches? Perish the thought.”

A comedy it is.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.