

All In

Once again we are leaping over several generations in the biblical story. Last week we stood on the cusp on the Israelites' entrance into the Promised Land, with Moses's giving them his last lecture about loving God with all that they are, insisting that they need to plaster it on their doorframes and inscribe it on their very beings. He was concerned that they might forget who and what should be central in their lives. It turns out he was right to be concerned. A few chapters ago, at the end of the book of Judges, we read, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes."¹ We soon meet Samuel, Hannah's precious baby boy who rules as a judge over Israel for a while. He appoints his sons as his successors, but they are corrupt and cannot be trusted. The people begin clamoring for a king. Samuel resists initially, but God tells him to listen to the voice of the people, saying:

They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you.²

God tells Samuel to warn them about the risks of having a king and sends Samuel on his way to anoint the one God chooses. First God chooses Saul, and then comes David. You may remember David, the youngest son of Jesse who is off tending sheep when Samuel comes to town on God's errand. Samuel anoints David while Saul is still king. The nation divides up its loyalties, even after Saul dies, but all of that is about to change. [Read 2 Samuel 5:1-5; 6:1-15]

As you may recall, tradition holds that the Ark of the Covenant is a chest containing the tablets on which the Ten Commandments are written. This chest is elaborately decorated and has been carried with the people of Israel throughout their wandering days. While no one would claim that it contained God—they knew better than to think any box could hold God—this chest signifies God's presence with the people in a tangible way. After recapturing the Ark from the Philistines, the Israelites have tucked it away for safe keeping for twenty years.

¹ Judges 21:25, New Revised Standard Version

² 1 Samuel 8:7-8, NRSV

Now David is determined to return the Ark, the presence of God to its rightful place at the center of the people. But there are rules about how it is to be carried and moved, rules about not manhandling the presence of God, and some scholars say that not following these rules is what gets David—and really poor Uzzah in trouble. At first David is angry—matching the anger God feels, and then he is frightened. So David pauses—panics really—and tucks the Ark away for safe keeping a second time. Only when he hears that the presence of the Ark has resulted in blessing for Obed-edom and his family does David dare to risk moving it again. And as they move it, David is careful to do it the right way, following the rules and sacrificing reverently as he goes, but he also dances—whirls, as some translations read, “with all his might.”

That “all his might” language echoes part of last week’s text: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”³ All your might...All in...Nothing held back...Complete surrender. David is a lot of things: ruthless, greedy, rash, but he is also the one who captures God’s heart as a shepherd boy; he is the one who unifies the tribes of Israel and leads them into their golden moment. And, it could be argued that David is all in, and let’s face it, not terribly Presbyterian. But I am not convinced that we have to be Solid Gold dancers to follow David’s lead. I think there is something deeply Presbyterian, or more importantly, deeply faithful about David’s whirling. In this moment David is not dancing to earn God’s praise. Instead, in this moment, he is responding to God’s entrusting him with leading the people. In this moment, he is responding to God’s deep love for him by seeking to ensure that God is at the center of the people and giving himself over to unabashed worship with every fiber of his being. He whirls with all his might and dances with everything in him. He does not hold back. But I confess that I do. And so I think I can learn something from David, and from two girls named Nora and Grace.

Nora is a beautiful little girl who was born with a rare condition known as Aicardi Syndrome, a genetic mutation that effects about 4000 girls worldwide. Nora is not verbal and cannot walk, but Nora loves to dance. A few years ago, Nora and her mom Jesse were attending their church’s production of *The Lion King*. As they passed Becky Deane, the director, who also happens to be a dance instructor, Becky turned to Nora with a beaming smile and said, “Let’s get you up there, too.” Jesse quickly responded, “Yes, she would love that.” But

³ Deuteronomy 6:5, NRSV

then Jesse panicked a bit. She and her husband Tyler didn't want to hinder the class, nor did they want to expose Nora to any criticism or ugliness. But they took the risk and Nora loved it, especially because of Grace. Grace is Becky's daughter who serves as an assistant with the preschool classes. She and Nora took to each other immediately, and over the course of a couple of years, Jesse and Becky decided to document Grace and Nora dancing a duet. The video is simply beautiful, but Jesse's description of the video and some still photos a friend took is what pushed me to see their dancing on a more profound level. Jesse shares:

One of Nora's challenges is communication and language. It can be easy to miss pieces of her nonverbal expression or even her technical skills. When I watch Nora dance, in a classroom with her peers, or on stage with Grace, I love watching how she connects with the music and all those around her. The chair is a platform for her, allowing her to move and connect with the motion and movement of the music and dance. This seemingly 'restful' position takes all of Nora's strength, concentration and trust in the person moving the extension of herself that is her chair.⁴

So even the simplest movements require a strength very few of us can begin to imagine, but it is Jesse's description about the end of the duet that made me catch my breath. In the film you see Grace lift Nora from her chair and lay her gently on the stage. Jesse writes:

The audience can see her fragility — infant-like in movement and ability, completely unable to move even her head up from the floor. But as Nora's Mom, I see it as her victory—her shining moment—because it is her chance to tell you—the audience—just how much of herself and her abilities she shared throughout the performance. Her moment of triumph is a moment of complete fragility and surrender. Her strength and beauty is in her ability and willingness to share this piece of herself, with Grace and with you—the audience. There is so much beauty in this final piece of Grace and Nora's duet— and beauty in my daughter's soul as she surrenders herself to rest and contentment, in the simple act of [lying] side-by-side with the friend she loves.⁵

⁴ <https://shelivedhappilyeverafter.com/2017/12/01/watching-nora-dance/>

⁵ <https://shelivedhappilyeverafter.com/2017/12/01/watching-nora-dance/>. The video may be seen here: <https://youtu.be/zcVxObrEEGQ>

Her moment of triumph is a moment of complete fragility and surrender. Triumph, fragility, surrender are not words we typically associate with each other. And yet in Nora's dance with Grace we see how those words flow together beautifully.

I am not a fan of being vulnerable. The thought of surrender leaves me a bit frightened. I like to think that loving God with my whole self is something I do with gusto and sheer will, but David and Nora show me, show us that there is something more to this claim on us. On Friday, a group of us attended prayers at the Islamic Center of Greater Harrisburg. Tucked behind a makeshift curtain with the other women, one of our friends asked if any of us would like to pray, too. While I do not speak a word of Arabic, I welcomed the chance to experience the prayers alongside our hosts. I prayed my own prayers silently while I held up my arms and then bowed and knelt alongside my neighbors. After the service concluded, we were invited to ask questions. One of the first questions was about the significance of beginning prayer with hands held up, a gesture we saw every worshipper make. Our host, Samia, answered, "How do you respond when a police officer approaches you? You put your hands up. And what does that mean? It means you surrender. When we approach God we say and show that we surrender ourselves to God." All your might...All in...Nothing held back...Complete surrender.

Our stewardship theme this year is "Grace Poured Out," as we celebrate and give thanks for the abundant gifts God pours out on us—gifts undeserved and unearned. Our prayerful consideration of what to give, our filling out of pledge cards, and our agreeing to serve are some of the ways we respond to these gifts. These responses are signs of our surrendering, gestures borne of recognizing that we are not our own. These gifts are tangible reminders that we belong body, mind, soul, and strength to this One who gives us life, this One who inspires David and Nora to dance, this One who calls us not to gut it out with gritted teeth or claim center stage and steal the spotlight, but instead calls us to rest, trust, and surrender to grace and to the gracious One who lifts us up and will not let us fall.

Thanks be to God. Amen.