

WHY WON'T YOU DANCE?

Psalm 119: 105-112
Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30

Faith Community
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Introduction

Kids love to play games. They can hardly be together for very long before they invent some game to play. They love hopscotch, tug-of-war, king of the hill, four square, monkey in the middle.

Even with all the electronic games available, kids still like the basics - hide and seek, tag, kick the can. These physical, outdoor games are favorites, the kinds you play as a group.

I

Kids have always loved to play games. I imagine in pre-historic times the young people played games together. Jesus' time was no different. Back then kids gathered at a friend's house or in the marketplace to play games like hide and seek, hopscotch, dice, and even checkers. Then they loved to dress up like other characters also, and they liked to play wedding.

The little jingle that is part of our scripture reading today is probably part of a game like "Red rover," where kids chant phrases back and forth. One side calls out, "We played the flute and you wouldn't dance," and the other side responds, "We wailed and you didn't mourn."

II

Jesus says this generation is like children in the marketplace who shout this jingle back and forth to each other. We play and you don't dance, we cry and you don't mourn. We aren't exactly sure what Jesus is saying, so Jesus makes it a little clearer for us. John the Baptist came and he didn't eat well or drink much. After all he was out there in the wilderness living on a harsh diet of locusts and wild honey. You wrote him off, you said he had a demon.

Jesus came eating and drinking, and you called him a glutton and a drunkard. You said, "He is a friend of tax collectors and sinners."

You criticize John the Baptist because he's no fun; you criticize Jesus because he's too much fun.

III

We've seen this attitude ourselves, haven't we? People don't get involved. Instead, they criticize. The people Jesus is talking about don't follow either Jesus or John the Baptist because they are criticizing them both - John the Baptist is too strict, Jesus is too lenient. Their criticism is a way of avoiding hearing these messages.

We see the same thing today. Take the church for example - People say all the church is interested in is money; or people who go to church are all hypocrites. Most recently, it isn't safe to go to church because all the priests are child molesters. It is a technique of using criticism as a way of avoiding the message of the one you don't want to hear.

I'm not saying, of course, that the church is perfect, or that everyone who attends, or leads, church is a saint, but one way to avoid hearing the message of the church is to be constantly criticizing it.

It's the same way with people. We can avoid hearing what someone has to say by criticizing them. Maybe we write off the ideas someone has because he dresses funny. Or we might discount the concerns a person has because we don't like the way they communicate that message.

We saw a lot of this during the Viet Nam war. At first people wrote off those who protested the war because they were "hippies" and they took to the streets. Lots of people ignored their protests, and just wrote them off as oddly dressed weirdo's.

If you're critical, you don't have to be concerned.

IV

This kind of criticism also leads us to be people who are observers of life rather than participants in it. When we are criticizing people or institutions we don't have to be involved with them.

Our criticism allows us to step back from them and observe. We can be removed from them and just talk about them.

"We played and you didn't dance, we wailed and you didn't mourn." The image Jesus gives us is of people who aren't engaged in life. They aren't dancing, they are mourning; they aren't happy, they aren't sad. They're just there. Commenting.

Author Christopher Isherwood opens one of his novels with these lines, "I. I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking. Recording the man shaving at the window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair."

Being too critical of others can make us mere observers of life, rather than people who are active, alive, involved.

Jesus, on the other hand, is someone who is committed to other people, and actively participating in the world. Jesus laughed; he enjoyed the wedding feast of friends. His first miracle was to change water into wine at a wedding celebration. He wasn't one who sat on the sidelines with turned up nose, and shaking his finger at people having fun.

But he was also one who felt the pain of others. He wept with his family and friends when one who was close to him died. He felt empathy for the woman who struggled because she had been married five times and was now living with a man who wasn't her husband. His heart went out to people. He was deeply involved in life.

"We played but you would not dance, we wailed but you would not mourn." In this scene Jesus encourages us to listen to people, not write them off because we have some criticism of them. He wants us to be involved - committed - to the full range of emotions that are involved with being truly alive.

Christ calls us to be fully open to hear his message, and more than that, to be ready to commit ourselves to him.

Conclusion

In the most recent issue of *Presbyterians Today*, the editors asked people to send in experiences they had when they felt the presence of God. There were several moving accounts. This is one of them.

Rev. A. D. Struble works part-time with his church, and full time for a home for “Wayward” boys. The boys are between 11 and 14. Almost all of the boys there are suffering with psychological problems. Most of those problems come from physical, sexual or emotional abuse they have experienced. They’ve all been in trouble with the law. The kids know Rev Struble as “the preacher.” On Saturday evenings he sits down at the dining room table to prepare for worship the next day.

After a while he got a following of five or six boys who would sit at the table and ask him questions while he was getting ready.

Later another boy, Eric, came but he wouldn’t sit at the table with the others. He sat across the room but within hearing distance of the other’s conversation. Even though they asked him over and over he always refused to come and sit with them.

Rev Struble gave each of the boys who came to talk with him a small wooden-cross key chain. They would clip them on their book bags, jacket zippers, even the tennis shoes.

Frequently they would break the cross and come to ask for another. Even though Eric never missed a Saturday evening meeting he never asked for a cross.

After nine months Eric’s time was up, and he was about to be released. One day he asked one of the other counselors to send Rev. Stuble to his room. He figured Eric just wanted to say good-bye privately.

When he went to Eric’s room they talked for a while, and Eric said good-bye. Then he reached under his covers and took out a large cross. It was made from the broken pieces of the other kid’s crosses, that they had thrown away. He had taken those pieces and glued them all together to make this large cross.

Eric looked up and said, “This is what Jesus Christ has done for me. He took all the broken pieces of my life and put them back together!”

Amen