

All Saints Sunday + November 4, 2018

When I was a seminary student in Berkeley, I once took a Sunday morning to visit St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco. The church community had quite a reputation for being both “out of the box” and deeply liturgical. I was fueled by curiosity and drawn by what I anticipated to be a rich worship experience. At the time the St. Gregory’s community met in the basement of another larger church. What the St. Gregory’s community did was a little different than what happened upstairs and required a different space. We first gathered at one end of the space to pray and sing and listen to the Word of God and then, after the sharing of the peace, the community moved to another part of the space to share in the communion meal. When it came time to move to the Table we were informed about the way we would move to the table. We would be dancing to the table.

When I heard the news, I was horrified and began to look for the nearest escape hatch. Me, dancing? Now, I will dance under extreme pressure but let’s just say I would never make the cut for “Dancing with the Stars.” I wondered if the other visitors that day felt the same dread. Before I had time to let it sink in or find a way to get out of there, the dance began. We were all joined together. Arm to arm. The dance steps involved a few steps forward and a few steps back and so on. If not for the graciousness of the dance leaders I wouldn’t have made it. And even though some of us were clumsy and awkward in that dance, it was okay. The saving grace was that clearly this was no contest and I was not alone.

Dancing is important for the St. Gregory community and now they have a building and a worship space that I was able to visit for the first time last August. The room wherein the community shares the holy meal is a rotunda and wrapped around the space on the walls above is a stunning mural of 100 Dancing Saints. I spent a good long time gazing at the Dancing Saints. It is colorful and vibrant, depicting women and men from all times and from all kinds of places. Some are raising their hands. Some are moving their bodies. Some of them have a hand placed on the shoulder of the saint next to them. In one way or another they are all dancing. Now, when the community dances to and around the table, they are surrounded by the dancing saints above.

Among the 100 dancing saints you’ll find a lot of people who are part of the great story of the Bible: Mary Magdalene, Paul, Barnabas. Most fittingly you’ll also find

King David who danced before the ark of God and Miriam who, with tambourine in hand, danced and sang songs of joy after the crossing of the Red Sea.

Some of the dancing saints are familiar luminaries through the ages: Patrick of Ireland, Francis of Assisi, mystics like Theresa Avila and Julian of Norwich, reformers like Martin Luther, Charles Wesley and John XXIII, and brave practitioners of justice like Sojourner Truth and the one among the 100 who remains living, Desmond Tutu.

Then there are the saints that you won't find in the Bible or on an official church calendar, but people who mean something to the St. Gregory community: Anne Frank, Justice Thurgood Marshall, Malcolm X, Shakespeare, Gandhi, John Muir, Margaret Mead, the great jazz singer Ella Fitzgerald and pictured with his saxophone, John Coltrane who liked to say that every song is a song to God.

Saints below. Saints above. One holy communion. All of us participants in this eternal dance of God.

How do we imagine eternity? There are many ways and the Bible itself has more than one image. Isaiah speaks of a rich feast of food and fine wine upon the mountain of God. In Revelation, John describes a new heaven and a new earth. And in both instances death is swallowed up and gone forever. Tears are wiped away. In these visions and many more, the future has been leaked out ahead of time. God's work of a reconciled world has already begun. For in Jesus Christ, God has made God's home with mortals. The eternal dance has already begun.

Today Cassia Marianne and Kincade Norman enter the dance. It will be fun to see how their lives unfold and what gifts they will bring to their dance with God. Along with their parents and sponsors, you will be making promises to support them. Today we promise to be their dance partners. They will discover what we already know, that some days the dance will feel awkward and clumsy. Some days it may feel a breeze, like a beautiful waltz. Other days it may feel like taking two steps forward and one step back! Some days it will be a cakewalk and, at times, an aimless wander.

Ah, but here is the good news. This dance is no contest. There are no winners or losers and we do not take the dance alone.

The best news of all? Jesus is leading the way. I thought that was the most stunning part of the 100 Dancing Saints. The Risen Jesus is right there shining amid this great dance and he is pictured with his knees up and his arms outstretched. Jesus leads the dance with grace and the Holy Spirit is the silent and invisible dance partner moving us always into the direction of Jesus.

Friends in Christ: welcome Cassia and Kincade to the dance. Let them lean on you and so trust in God and help them to know that a great cloud of witnesses dances with us too, cheering us on. Amen.