

"The Dancing Happens Later"
A meditation based on Exodus 14: 21-22
and Matthew 14: 25 and 29
June 6, 2009
SCNC Annual Gathering Worship
Sharon R. Graff

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*[During "Teach me to Dance" I walk across the
labyrinth to begin the meditation from the
labyrinth's center...after the scripture readings]*

Ahh...the center of the labyrinth...

a place of illumination...

Through years of leading workshops on the
labyrinth, I've seen people race to the center

to dance or skip joyfully,

to sit thoughtfully,

to cry or laugh,

perhaps hoping that life will parallel labyrinth.

Yet while life's twists and turns

are elongated and extended over weeks,

months, and sometimes years of time,

the labyrinth provides a kind of microcosm

of that experience...

and more often than not in life,

the dancing happens later.

In the stories alluded to

by this morning's two scripture readings,
Miriam got it right, but only after the fact...

She danced and sang

and through her dancing and singing,
she told the story of the Red Sea Crossing.

Peter surfaced

to tell his own version of the story—
the story of stepping out in faith—
but only after he'd dried off
from the drenching...

*[During the next section, walk slowly
from the center to the entrance of the labyrinth]*

How we want to be there NOW,

dancing, laughing, embracing, celebrating,
telling the story
of our own successful journey of faith...

How we long

to be in the middle of the labyrinth—
where all is made clear—
and we want to be there NOW,
without enduring the twists and turns
inevitable in any worthwhile journey.

God, how we want to dance...

God, how we long to dance...NOW!

Friends, the stories all agree:

the dancing happens later.

Now it is for us to step, one step at a time...

A rabbi once said

he liked to imagine Moses

having to take one step INTO the water

before the water parted—

trusting that it would part

with each step he took.

Like Moses and Miriam at the water's edge,

now there is for us no dancing,

but rather an attentive watching

to take the next step only.

The dancing, we are promised, happens later...

[Arrive at entrance to labyrinth...and walk it...]

How do I know this?

Through my own circuitous journey of faith

that changed dramatically—

believe it or not—

in the darkness before the dawn

of September 11, 2001.

I was, at that time,
working as a secretary in a seminary office
here in Claremont.

Ordained some 20 years before,
I'd served in a variety
of ministerial roles...
and, in a word, I was done.

In each of the places of ministry,
there had been pain—
starting with the wealthy couple
in one congregation
who wined and dined me

in an attempt to convince me
to lead a coup
and unseat the current Senior Minister
who was in the beginning stages of Alzheimer's...
continuing with many of the twists and turns
endured by most pastors...
and ending with a colleague
who actually threatened my life.

The church can be a tough crowd to play to,
don't you know?!

I had not been very successful
in dealing with or avoiding the pain,
and so, by the end of 20 years, I was done.

Done with the church...

Done with God...

Done with anything
having to do with ministry.

And, taking a page out of the psalms

I told God honestly and directly,

"I am done...

I've given you 20 years,

now go pick on someone else..."

Having put God on notice,

I went to work in my fallback profession
of secretary.

Bored, but happy

that the mortgage was being paid
after a year or so away from ministry,

I tried in vain to go to sleep

on the night of September 10th.

Sleep did not come.

In its place, while I was wide awake,
came a series of scenes...

vignettes, really...

in the style of those large works of fine art
acted out on stage
at the Laguna Arts Festival each year.

Larger than life,

these scenes played one after the other
on the screen of my brain.

They had in common three things:

- 1) they were all church scenes, with
people up front doing interesting things,
- 2) there was a lot of laughing and joy, and
- 3) I was a leader in each one.

Repeatedly,

as these scenes flashed across my mind,
I lay there and reminded God
that I was done...

"Remember me?

I'm the one who asked to be left alone...

I'm done with you,

the church, and all its people..."

The scenes continued,

not in a mocking or disrespectful way,
but persistently and, I might add, creatively.

At one point,

I remember thinking that
with all these creative programs
being displayed in my brain,
if I was ever, possibly,
considering thinking about
returning to the church,
well, I might want to write
some of this stuff down and use it!

The vignettes continued,

I continued to resist them,
and sleep continued to elude me
that late, late night.

Finally, caving to the reality of a sleepless night,

the thought came to me to go downstairs
and open the drawer of the computer desk,
where, years before,
I had stuffed my last completed
ministerial profile.

Finding my profile,

I sat down to read my statement of faith
composed when I was just beginning
in ministry.

To my own shock and awe,

I still believed

much of what was written therein.

Tears began forming in the corners of my eyes,

and then another series of thoughts

started their insistent parade:

“Put your papers in order,

and put them in at Redlands...”

Back story:

I had heard that the Redlands UCC

pastoral position was open...

and had ignored that fact

while sitting quietly at my secretarial desk...

I didn't care...

I was done with all things church!

So, as you might expect,

when the two-part instruction repeated itself

for the next couple of hours,

I continued my determined resistance.

Crying, weeping, railing, ranting,

being as clear and direct with the Divine

as I have ever been,

I reminded God with painstaking detail

of each injustice that had been done to me
while in active ministry.

Tearfully, I reminded God

of the times my health had failed,
compromised by stress;
and with despair,

I admitted to the Divine that I, apparently,
did not have the stomach for church work,

and please,

would you go away

and let me get some sleep???

“Get your papers together,
and put them in at Redlands...”

was the only reply

from that place deep within each of us

where the echo of the Divine voice

is most frequently heard.

After two hours of arguing—

a long time for a redhead!—I was spent.

With the weariness also experienced, I imagine,

by Moses stepping into the water

not knowing whether or not

he would drown...

with the weariness of Peter,
who once again longed to be
the teacher's pet
yet this time forgot his wetsuit...

I, too, finally succumbed.

At 3:30 in the morning,
while unbeknownst to me the terrorists
were making their own promises to their God,
I said wearily to the Divine,
"IF you will let me get
just three hours of sleep,
I promise to make a phone call
in the morning to the Conference Office
and start the process back into ministry."

I returned to my bed
and fell asleep immediately...
and when I awoke, of course,
it was to the news
that planes were flying into buildings.

Like all of us on that day,
I became engrossed
in the unfolding
and seemingly unending tragedy.

Phone calls to our son, an airline pilot,
to be sure he was safe
were uppermost in my mind,
and I quite forgot
the promises of the night before.

Somewhere about mid-morning,
on Tuesday, September 11,
I thought,

“I believe I made a promise
to the Creator of the Universe
last night...

perhaps it would be good to keep it...!”

And I went into a private office
and made the first of many calls
beginning my return to active ministry.

Unbeknownst to me,
during the same season,
the Search Committee and Congregation
of Redlands United Church of Christ
were walking through their own difficult
twists and turns on the journey.

50 profiles reviewed
and no suitable match...

doubting whether Spirit was guiding them or not.

Having just completed

a new sanctuary and office complex,
the congregation had prepared for months
for the dedication,
scheduled as it turned out,
on the Sunday after September 11th.

What should they do?

Go ahead with the party

when the nation was in shock and fear?

Surely,

with no ministerial candidate in sight
and the fearful threat of more attacks
on our nation,
there was no dancing in Redlands,
but only more twists and turns.

Fast forward a few months—

after the dedication party

gave just the respite needed in September—

the Redlands' search committee interviewed me,

liked me and I them,

and on April Fool's Day of 2002—

just 6 months after my sleepless night—

I was welcomed as the
new Pastor and Teacher of Redlands UCC.

Now in our 8th year together—

longer than I've stayed anywhere else
and longer than this congregation had
with any other pastor—

our commitment remains steady
to be a bright light

of progressive Christianity in our community.

We have courageously spoken out at City Council
about the needs of parolees
and the unjust business practices
of Wal-mart.

We happily accompany children
of incarcerated parents to visit their moms.

In partnership
with the Redlands Police Department,
we began Step by Step:
A Parolee Reentry Program.

We have fully funded two work trips
to the Gulf Coast to muck out
and help rebuild homes
destroyed by Hurricane Katrina.

We have provided discussions and debates
on political propositions,
relevant ballot issues,
and invited
provocative and prophetic speakers
into our community
through our Speaker Series.

The first Friday of every month,
we offer free of charge and with popcorn (!),
a screening of a documentary
of social consequence:
this has been a welcome forum for movies
such as "Call Me Malcolm,"
"Under the Same Moon,"
"Sicko,"
"For the Bible Tells Me So,"
"An Inconvenient Truth,"
and a dozen others;
many community citizens look forward
to coming to our church
for this level of education.

During the 2008 campaign season,
we were leaders in the local

No on Proposition 8 Phone-banking
and hosted a community forum
on marriage equality;
currently we continue to work with others
in our community
to assure equality under the law
for all loving couples who wish to marry.

Sermons, prayers, and book studies
do not shy away from issues in real life.

I believe that the timing
of our being called together by Spirit
back in September of 2001
brings to our ministry in Redlands
a focused urgency that is not just for us.

This "no fear" or "step out in faith" stance
is one familiar to Moses, to Miriam,
to Peter, and certainly to Jesus himself.

And it is a stance into which the Spirit calls
all our congregations.

As has been noted,
we Christians are to do the work of Christ
with a Bible in one hand
and a newspaper in the other.

A well-known-to-me source
of many things UCC—
my husband who is a lifelong UCC'er
and participant in many of our congregations
across this great country—
assures me that in every community
in which he has lived,
the UCC church in town is
(comparatively speaking)
usually the most progressive,
the most welcoming,
the most conscious of the interplay
of Gospel and Newspaper.

For us to get to that place of illumination
and relevancy together, requires,
as we've been hearing repeatedly
this weekend, requires our letting go.

Letting go...to make room for what?...
we might ask.

In my own journey,
and perhaps in yours as well,
in the middle of that solitary night,
when I let go of my own self-definition

as one who could not and would not
weather the twists and turns of ministry
 ever again,
it was then that the Spirit
in all her creativity and joy
 and laughter and wonder
could take my hand
 and finally lead me toward the dancing.

Frederick Buechner,
one of my favorite Christian theologians,
 says confidently,
"If you want to know
 what kind of Christian you are...
 watch where your feet take you..."

I would add:
 watch what your eyes see
 and listen to what your ears hear
 and savor what your mouth tastes,
 and be not afraid to ask questions.

As you eat wedding cake
at that family wedding this summer,
ask yourself, "Why is marriage only legal
 for heterosexual couples?"

As you hear the voices
of undocumented immigrants
visiting while they build the wall
that will separate our two countries,
ask yourself,
“Is this what Jesus would have us do?”

As you watch the decisions of Congress unfold
or read about the latest local tragedy
in your community, ask yourself,
“How are we in this Christian congregation
being nudged by the Spirit
to embody the only two commands
Christ gave—
to love God and
to love neighbor as we love ourselves?”

You see, friends,
we are not called to further entangle
church and state;
I believe we are called by the same Spirit
that kept me awake that night,
we are called to see the world
through the eyes of Christ,

to hear the community's needs
through the ears of Christ,
and to walk the journey as the feet of Christ.

And so shall we do,
one faithful step after another.

~ Amen and Blessed Be ~

"Beyond Categories"
A meditation for Communion Sunday
June 7, 2009
Redlands United Church of Christ
Sharon R. Graff

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What do we see in today's scriptures?

In Isaiah, enthusiasm...here I am, send me!

In Romans, clarity about living in and being led by the Spirit...if we live according to the Spirit and are led by the Spirit of God, writes the author, then we, too, are children of God...we have been adopted by God, not to fall back into fear, but to enter into a most intimate relationship with God as Daddy, God as Mommy...

In John, birthright...we are born in Spirit in love, for love, through love...no fear...no judgment...For God so loved the world, writes the author of John, to send the Son not to condemn but to save.

As I read and pondered these passages this week—especially in light of our continued commitment around here to action on behalf of others—it occurred to me that in all three passages, we are nudged to move beyond categories so that we are open to being called by God, open to being led by the Spirit, and

open to be embraced by the love of Christ. Beyond categories...to love...

This week, you have blessed me with many pastoral conversations...a good and healthy contrast to last week's prophetic role that I assumed. In them, I have heard our call to love—beyond, despite, and because.

This weekend, also, at the UCC Conference Annual Gathering, I have heard the call to love in the midst of diversity—because, beyond, despite. In the diversity of the Southern California Nevada UCC Conference of which we are a part, over 1100 school kits were collected for children in African countries who may have never even seen a pencil. In the diversity of our Conference over 15 new congregations of all stripes were welcomed and celebrated. In the diversity of who we are in the UCC, prayers were prayed and songs sung to thank God for the love that holds us together as family.

Here, too, at RUCC, this same love is palpable in our conversations, our embraces, our listening to one another and our commitment to honoring the diversity of our body.

As we prepare to receive and share this holy communion meal, I invite you to hear the wise words of one of our brothers in faith: Paul Hodson, who was describing his experience this past year as a volunteer with the AFS international student exchange program. During the closing ceremony, the kids and adults were sitting around in a circle and were asked to share what they had learned from AFS this year.

Paul said, "What I learned from AFS this year is:

In looking around this circle of diverse friends, I see many beliefs and customs. No matter where we are from—Germany, Sweden, Brazil or Indonesia—and no matter what we choose to believe—one God, many Gods or no God—we are all friends, we tolerate and love each other for what we are and what we believe.

This is my hope: I hope this understanding and respect for each other will continue to grow with us and will ultimately be the beginning of a true world peace..."

Beyond categories...to arrive at love...

here at this table we are invited to eat and drink and love one another in a unity of spirit...

come, sisters and brothers, for all is ready!