

Good Reception

^{NRS} Mat 3:13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

One place I've never felt comfortable is the dance floor. Now, I love music. I love hearing it, I love watching it- but I've always felt awkward out there on the dance floor.

I've had some history with dance that hasn't helped. When I was in the fourth grade, I entered the elementary school talent show with a break dance routine. My mom wouldn't let me have parachute pants, so I did the best I could with these cheap nylon exercise pants that were way too big and this white muscle shirt. (To this day I have no idea what made me think this could ever, EVER be a good idea. I'm just grateful youtube hadn't been invented- I would have been famous.) I went out there on the cafeteria stage with a big piece of cardboard, my lame soundtrack from the movie *Breakin'*, and I did the worm, forwards *and* backwards, the robot, the backspin, and a pretty frightening attempt at a head spin that in retrospect makes me just glad I didn't hurt myself. Well, believe me the kids who watched this NEVER forgot it- and each of them shared with me with the kindness and tact 10 and 11 year olds are famous for that I might want to rethink my career in hip-hop.

My dance humiliation didn't stop there. My worst moment no doubt came when I was in the 7th grade and I went to my very first, and last, school dance. Being fairly clue free about what circle of hell I was about to enter, I remember actually being excited

going shopping with my mom who was positive that picking out just the right tie would ensure my success. Needless to say, it only took me walking through the hall to the cafeteria five minutes to learn two things: 1) I was the only person wearing a tie; and 2) my mom might have slightly off base in her belief that this tie, or any tie, would be the basis for any kind of success in the 7th grade.

Now to my credit, in spite of all this I didn't give up on dance. When I was in college I dated a woman whose parents were really into dance, you know, the kind of people with one set of shoes for Country Western and another for West Coast Swing. Being a good sport, I agreed to take lessons with her. Like me, she was a beginner, so we were in the same boat. And then, without even the thought of getting a new tie, we learned two step, the schottische, and the ever popular Cotton Eyed Joe. It was going so well that one night she wasn't able to make, and I decided to go anyway. We were learning the swing that night. At least some of us were learning- some folks in the class actually knew how to dance pretty well already. And as luck would have it, I got paired with one of these.

My partner turned out to be a large, middle-aged, Asian woman wearing an ill-fitting t-shirt proclaiming to the world that she was "Born to dance". That should have been all I needed to fake a leg injury and limp out of there. But I didn't. I stayed. Before even telling me her name she told me she loved the swing, that it was her favorite dance, and that I better dance "real good." Well, I had seen the swing with it's energy and it's spontaneity and people jumping all over the place- and while I enjoyed watching the swing, I was afraid of the swing. I was afraid of being responsible for all of that.

Well, it didn't take the dancing queen to figure out I was not going to "dance real good". And things went south quickly. She started to become frustrated, rolling her eyes, huffing her breath. Finally, on the verge of angry tears, she pushed me away shouting something I didn't understand. Sensing imminent dance catastrophe, the teacher came over quickly to see what was the matter.

"He's no good! He's not leading! He's supposed to lead and he's not leading!", the woman complained loudly. She complained so loudly in fact that someone stopped the music, and everybody in the ball room just kind of circled around us to see what was going on. I felt completely exposed. It was like 4th grade and 7th grade all over again. "He's no good. He's not leading! He's supposed to lead and he's not leading!"

This is what John was feeling, wasn't it? This is what John was feeling that day when Jesus came rolling in. John was out there at the Jordan, baptizing the best he knew how, but he knew he wasn't the best- he knew he was just an amateur compared to the one who was coming, the one whose sandals he didn't even feel worthy to tie. And so along comes Jesus, the one John's been waiting for his whole life long, and it's like finally, he can hand off the baton. He's been out there just pouring dirty Jordan water over people, telling them to straighten up and fly right, and finally, here comes Jesus, the master- the one who baptizes not with water alone but with the Holy Spirit.

But as John starts to get out of the river to make way for Jesus to take his place, what happens? What happens? Jesus stops him. He stops John. He tells him to stay where he is, that he's not taking anything over, that he's not there to lead anything. No,

in fact rather than being there to lead and to give- he's there to receive. He tells John he's there for baptism.

Well John actually blocks Jesus' way. Talk about guts! He actually blocks his way, telling Jesus, "No! You must be confused. You're the leader here. *I* need to be baptized by *you*- not the other way around." Like my dance partner, John was expecting great things when Jesus shows up. He expects Jesus to take over and to make everything fantastic. But instead John finds himself frustrated with a leader who isn't doing what he ought to be doing. And like my dance partner, John is thinking, "He's not leading! He's supposed to be leading, but he's not leading!"

We're supposed to be disciples of Jesus, but we're really more disciples of John, I think. This image of Jesus asking for help, of placing himself in John's hands, of receiving from John- this is uncomfortable for us. It's so much easier for us to be on the giving end of things than it is the receiving end.

This is true for us in big, serious ways. Any of you who have been sick, really sick, you know how hard it can be to allow others to care for you. When I worked in the hospital, the main floor I worked on was cardiac. I worked with a lot of men there in the middle of their lives- men who were used to calling the shots. One of the things I heard over and over again was how difficult it was to be there, and not because of the pain, which was incredible, but to have all their nurses and their family having to do everything for them, to bathe them, to help them walk, even to eat sometimes. I know each of these men wouldn't have hesitated a minute to offer this help to someone else. But being on the receiving end- this was incredibly difficult.

This is also true for us in ways that may seem small, but I think are important, too. One of these small things is something we do that drives me nuts. And just for the record I wrestle with this, myself. What is it? We don't receive compliments well. When someone criticizes us, we may try to blow it off, but down deep it's so easy to believe in these critical words, these hard words. There's a part of us that seems to just suspect that they're true. But when someone says something nice, something kind, we think to ourselves, "Oh, they're just saying that." Or we say these awkward things like, "Oh that was nothing." Or "Oh, it really wasn't that good." Or worse yet we try to tell the person complimenting us about all the mistakes we made that they either didn't care about or notice. Why do we do this? Why can we give but not receive? Why is it so much harder to believe the good things people say than the negative?

Well, we were all waiting to hear what our dance instructor was going to say. The dancing queen had one hand on her hip and her face thrust forward as if daring the teacher to do anything but take her side. And I wasn't saying a thing, I was just standing there feeling humiliated and, to be honest, agreeing with her. I mean everything she said was true. I wasn't any good. I was supposed to be leading, and I didn't know what I was doing. But what the instructor said surprised us all.

She spoke mainly to my partner. And she got right up close to her face. And she said dancing is a partnership- it's never about one person. She said just as a good leader can bring out the best in a weaker follower, a strong follower can make an unsure leader much, much better. She finished saying the problem with us wasn't that I was a terrible leader, that I wasn't- I was just a beginner; the problem was that *she* was refusing to

receive direction. I was stunned- I think we all were. My partner, well, now my former partner, turned on her heel and took off in a huff. And our teacher turned to the rest of the class and said it was time to take a break. As people were moving off, she turned to me and asked me if I was OK. And I told her I was mostly fine, but that I was going to leave for the night. She told me she hoped I wouldn't let one bad experience ruin dance for me. I smiled inwardly thinking to myself thinking "Oh, if only it was *one* bad experience", and I told her that if I did ever try again, it would be because of her.

Dancing is about leading and following, giving and receiving- and so is faith. But, we only get excited about one half of this. We've got stacks of books on leadership- just try to find a book on followership. I mean we don't even have a word for it. But faith is about both, giving and receiving, leading and following. It has to be. Anyone remember what happens immediately after Jesus' baptism? Right after Jesus is baptized by John and receives the blessing of God he is thrust out into the wilderness to be put to the test by the devil. By receiving baptism from John, by being blessed by him- Jesus wasn't failing to be a leader. He wasn't being selfish. He was gathering his strength for what was about to be a very painful and difficult journey.

When times are good for us- we should give thanks and we should give to others and be generous. But, in the wilderness places of our lives, when there is no one to give us care, no one around to give us blessing- we have to live off of what we've been able to receive.

So hear the good news- and receive it deep into your being. In Christ we are all children of God. We are beloved. And with us God is well pleased. In Christ you are a child of God. You are beloved. And with you God is well pleased.

And this week when someone is kind to you, or someone offers you a compliment. Please, please, please- don't tell them you're not all that great or they should have seen all the mistakes you've made. No. Just say, "Thank you." And then act like you believe them. **Amen.**