

EMBODIED PRAYER

RECLAIMING THE AGE-OLD WISDOM OF THE BODY THROUGH MOVEMENT AND DANCE

Kathryn Sparks

I call the prayer “Heartbeat.” We form two circles and hold hands; the steps are very simple. Moving in toward the center, we step right, left, right, and hold; then moving backward, step left, right, left, and hold; in two, three, hold; back, two, three, hold. In and out we go in silence, repeating the steps over and over and over. After awhile, I ask the people to close their eyes if they wish. There is no fixed time for the dance. Feeling the rhythm and dynamic of the group, I eventually bring the prayer to a close. As we stand in silence, we breathe deeply. Amen.

“Heartbeat” brings varied responses from workshop participants. “Peaceful, beautiful, meditative,” some say. “It is an image of community.” “The only sound of our feet moving together in the silence centered me.” “I got off the rhythm but the group held me up and I found my way back.” At one Advent gathering, there was an older woman who came with a cane. She was unsteady on her feet and it became clear that she could not participate in some of the community circle dances we were doing.

When it came time to end with this dance, the rest of the group urged her on despite her protests. I will always

remember the way the group held her, arms around her, helping her step, and it strikes me that a profound listening was taking place. In our simple stepping we were listening to each other at a body level, trusting our feet to know the steps, and listening for our neighbors’ feet to help guide us. We were very close to each other, touching; these were people I had known for one hour but with whom I now felt a special bond. What I am describing is embodied prayer.

What does it mean to be “embodied” as individuals and as the Church? How can our prayer life become a

rich, full embodiment of our relationship with God? I have spent my life dancing, from studio to stage and in many diverse settings, but for the last ten years my work has been centered primarily in churches. People often ask me if I encounter resistance when I dance in worship, and my answer is a resounding no. What I overwhelmingly find is that people in the pews are hungry for movement—hungry for a sense of self that includes the body and worship that affirms this.

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not believe we are looking for some nice, added extra in the form of an occasional dance or dramatic piece in worship, but a radical shift in our awareness and experience of embodiment. Pastors and lay leaders, more and more, welcome and even long for simple, embodied acts in worship but do not feel free or even know how to try new things. Most seminaries do not model or teach the history or praxis of various ways of including our body in worship, or stress the importance of it. The age-old wisdom of the body, to which every single person has access, has long been rejected, suppressed, and even forgotten by the church.

Embodied prayer is about reclaiming that wisdom and entering into dynamic relationship with God that includes all of who we are, body and soul. It is individual and corporate in accordance with scripture and tradition. Embodied prayer in worship, *as* worship, comes in the form of dance as well as simple congregational movements to express praise, thanksgiving, or repentance. It can be a vehicle for interpretation, proclamation, and transformation. Perhaps what we are looking for is the language to validate our inclusion of the body in worship and the movement vocabulary to enact it. What does scripture have to say about the body, movement, and dance? And how can these inform and strengthen our worship of God? our faith?

THE BODY

A couple of years ago, I taught a workshop at Wesley Theological Seminary, in Washington, D.C., called “Dancing the Psalms.” My goal for the three-hour workshop was to present the Psalms as a way of life that engages all of who we are. I did not want us to merely dance the words on the page but to find ways, through movement, of integrating our varied experiences of God, each other, and ourselves. Psalms were our foundation as we clapped and stomped praise and thanksgiving (Psalm 100); as we walked and turned, remembering the transience of human life in light of eternity (Psalm 90); as we sang and gestured God’s promises to us (Psalm 46); as we held hands in silence to honor our pain and thirst for God (Psalm 42); as we created dances together; and finally, as we circled and spiraled in wonder at God’s unique plan for each one of us (Psalm 139). Clapping, stomping, praising, remembering, singing, thirsting, creating, circling, wondering—in community—we experienced

embodiment. The Psalms are the place in Hebrew Scripture that calls us most fervently to a holistic relationship with God, each other, and ourselves.

When we examine the roots of our faith, we find that the unity of body and soul is ordained and blessed by God. It is uncharacteristic of the Old Testament to subdivide the human being. In Genesis 2, God stoops down and picks up the dust of the earth, fashions it, and breathes into it; and this becomes a living being (Genesis 2:7), a living soul. “He [man] does not *have* a soul. He *is* a living soul . . . He does not possess his flesh. He *is* flesh.”¹ Both the Old and New Testaments assume that the human being is a unity of matter and spirit. “There are no Hebrew equivalents for ‘body’ and ‘soul’ since it was understood that only the living, embodied male or female existed.”²

Human beings are created in the image of God. We are created in the image of God not because of who we are, but because of whom we point to (God). Each one of us is an embodied prayer from the heart of God. In the Old and New Testaments, men and women experience themselves as belonging to a divine history, and in this divine history the human being always appears *as a whole*.³ “Consequently, the human being perceives himself, not through reflection and introspection, but in the experiences of the history of the covenant and the promises of his God.”⁴ An inner hierarchy of body and soul in which the soul is “higher” and the body is “lower,” the soul as dominating and the body as subservient, is alien to scripture.⁵ “The unity of soul and body, what is inward and what is outward, the centre and the periphery of the human being is to be comprehended in the forms of covenant, community, reciprocity, a mutual encircling, regard, agreement, harmony and friendship.”⁶

One could say that the concept of “body” is the keystone of Paul’s theology in the New Testament. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:12–13). Varied interpretations of Paul’s letters inform our understanding of the life of faith, but it is clear that he did not suppress or seek to silence the body. “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19–20).

Noted dancer and theologian Judith Rock says, “How is it possible to love the fair beauty of the Lord and to distrust our physicality?”⁷ The heart of the Christian tradition is the Incarnation—God enfleshed—and Christ came to save all of who we are. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). As we seek to pattern our life after the life of Christ we can be confident in the fact that our body is a sacred place for prayer, healing, and transformation; a storehouse of thought and memory; an instrument of change; and that God calls us to worship with our body, mind, spirit, and heart. We can be rooted in the beautiful and messy world of scripture that encompasses the self as unified in body and soul. It lifts up the whole person—all of our parts are who we are—and seeks to turn us toward our Creator through stories, genealogies, songs, and parables.

MOVEMENT IN WORSHIP

Beginning with God, movement is everywhere in scripture. “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:1–2). Carolyn Deitering puts it like this:

In the beginning, God created the human person a miracle of wholeness and integrity, embodied spirit, enspirited flesh. Throughout history, whenever God spoke to those he had created, he spoke not only to their minds, hearts, and imaginations, but also to their physical senses: through a burning bush, a voice, bare feet on holy ground, manna in the desert. And over and over again, God spoke to the human being through the sense of movement: come here, go there, bow down in worship, lift holy hands in praise, join in procession, shout, clap, dance!⁸

Appropriately, we find in the Presbyterian *Book of Order*:

In the Old and New Testaments and through the ages, the people of God expressed prayer through actions as well as speech and song. So in worship today it is appropriate (a) to kneel, to bow, to stand, to lift hands in prayer, (b) to dance, to clap,

to embrace in joy and praise, (c) to anoint and to lay hands in intercession and supplication, commissioning and ordination.⁹

The *Book of Order*, right before us, gives us a vocabulary for movement in worship, of which all can partake. We live our lives through movement, even in our everyday routines. We walk, run, play, care for others, shout, laugh deep belly laughs, exercise to stay healthy, breathe. But when we step inside a sanctuary, we are mostly still. This is necessary and desired—to hear the still, small voice of God speaking to us—but there are places in worship where we can also feel empowered by the Spirit to “flesh out.” Understandably, sometimes it is not as simple as being empowered by the Spirit. Most churches are not designed for much congregational movement. Pews are locked down, and there is often only wiggle room for upper body motion. Out of habit we stay glued to our bulletins, and for most of our singing we need a hymnbook.

Furthermore, despite scriptural invocations to move, clap, lift our arms, and dance when we worship God, somewhere along the way of life many people come to believe that they cannot dance, perhaps feeling that they have “two left feet.” Dancing anywhere, much less in church, causes discomfort and self-consciousness. And since our Western culture is the product of the Enlightenment, faculties of the mind are highly prized over and against the body; we are living in an age of reason, technology, and objectification of God’s creation for human advancement and progress. Despite our roots, long ago Western Christianity fell prey to the Greek notions of dualism, divided body and soul. Though many churches see the need for a recovery of integrated body, mind, heart, spirit as a faith tradition we still have a ways to go. As a denomination, the Word is so central to our liturgy that it is no wonder Presbyterians tend to be the best educated and most scholarly bunch around. Not only do we need a shift in our awareness—God speaks to us through our physicality as much as She does through out mind and heart—but perhaps a few courageous folk to get us started!

In addition to the choreographed movements of liturgists between pulpit, table, and font—remnants of the movements that have been part of our history as a church for hundreds of years—simple embodied acts in worship can include the following: They can be as simple as the pastor going barefoot when she preaches (what a way to provoke dialogue) or the minister of music inviting the congregation to clap during an

upbeat anthem. After several times doing this, perhaps the congregation would be moved on its own with continued encouragement. Pastors can raise arms on “Lift up your hearts!” and invite the congregation to respond with uplifted arms, “We lift them up to the Lord!” Other times of prayer can be led with outstretched hands or raised arms and invitations to the congregants to follow as they are led by the Spirit. Giving permission is a large part of becoming “embodied” as a worshiping community. Regularly holding hands during the Lord’s Prayer is a wonderful way to feel the power of the prayer as intercession and to strengthen our ties to one another.

There is a place for spontaneous gestures of praise and thanksgiving in worship. Processionals, which have movement built into them, can inspire a movement response from the congregation in the form of rhythmic clapping, swaying, or raised arms. And children, naturally, bring movement into the life of the church. Music ministers can teach movements to children for beloved, easily memorized songs; and children, in turn, can teach the congregation the movements during worship. This is a wonderful way to create stories and history together. With movement, those songs remain in the collective memory of the congregation. Many of the embodied acts we long for in worship are on our doorstep. “Human wholeness is a sacred gift. Reclaiming that gift, wherever it has been lost, is imperative for a Church that teaches that God has become a human person. A vital point of reentry into wholeness and reclamation of the gift is the acceptance of bodily movement as a revelation of the inner life of the spirit and as a powerful shaper of that inner life.”¹⁰

DANCE IN WORSHIP

Dance is . . . a visceral celebration of the mind, body, and spirit in motion . . . Dance is rhythm, flow, and stillness living through our body . . . our temple. Dance is the up and down, in and out, here and there of our total being. Dance is

medicine for the soul. Dance is a process of becoming. Dance is giving thanks for what is sacred in our lives. Dance is community. Dance is God moving through us . . . Dance is healing energy shared. Dance is our way of saying thank you for all that is. Dance is divine. Dance is joy in motion . . . Dance is for everyone.¹¹

The quote above is one woman’s answer to the question, *what is dance?* It speaks volumes for what we are about when we bring movement and dance into worship. What is it that we hope for when we invite the dance into our liturgy? The purpose of dance in worship is to point us toward God in the many and varied ways we express our relationship with God—in praise, thanksgiving, offering, proclamation. As the art form of the body, dance deepens our experience of the Word and fleshes out its meaning in new ways. The dancer(s) who dance before a congregation hope to bridge the division between body, mind, and spirit. We hope to quicken the breath, bring awareness to the body, open hearts, and help the congregation bring our full humanity before God in prayer and celebration. Dance in worship is embodied prayer.

Throughout history and across cultures and continents people have prayed and praised through dance. Although it may be a young art form in Western worshiping congregations, dance has in fact had a long and tenuous relationship with the church; but before and during Jesus’ time and in cultures around the world, dance has long been a vitally important way to pray. The Israelites and early Christians were a dancing people of God.

The early church carried on the tradition of the circle dance . . . Throughout the Middle Ages there were a wide variety of dances, some even prescribed for bishops! . . . But a living, deep understanding of the religious significance of dance was being lost in the midst of “development,” and so our western civilization

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gradually relegated dance, a mode of expression so fundamental to human life, to secular activity. The secular world became its only home.¹²

Dance is undergoing a rebirth in Western Christian worship. Those who have never heard the term “liturgical dance” question it, and some are shocked at the thought of dance in worship; but many churches are trying it and are finding meaning and depth in ways they had not imagined. Dance crosses denominational lines and sparks dialogue and community when done in interfaith contexts. In my years of dancing in churches what I have found is that dance is taking root church by church, not by denomination. Nevertheless, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has much to learn from dance. By welcoming and embracing dance artists on Sunday mornings and through workshops and residencies, we will grow in faith.

The dancer who works in the church has the responsibility of educating and acting within the traditions of the community, with pastors and choir directors. The dancer must speak the language of the church with pastors, know the liturgy, and create dances that complement and deepen the worship of the congregation. It is also imperative that trained dancers, who understand that they are worship leaders, direct dance and movement groups in churches.

I take seriously the statement that dance is for everyone. The deeply exciting part of my life as a dancer in the church is working with people who think they cannot dance but give it a try and discover, beyond their wildest dreams, the joy of movement. However, as the director of a dance piece for worship, it is my responsibility to give dancers—often members of the congregation—movement that is appropriate for their skill level and ability. One way to do this, especially when working with scripture, is to create “dramatic movement”: giving the embodied text a change-of-scenes quality. Most anyone can remember shapes, directions, levels, and simple sequencing—actions common to us that can be artistically arranged in a way that elucidates and breathes new life into age-old readings. Time spent with a scripture passage reveals structures for creating the dance. Through creative

exercises based on themes found within, movement can be generated from dancers themselves, refined by me, and presented back to them in a simple format. There is great joy in seeing a movement you created being used in the dance on a Sunday morning; and there is a feeling that you helped embody the text to bring it alive in a fresh and exciting way. Working this way also allows dancers of many abilities to work together. Parts can be created for people with more dance training. Shapes or walking patterns can be given to those for whom sequencing is difficult. The important thing is that the dance is for everyone and, most importantly, for God. This is an example of embodied prayer, the process of creating dance with people and the result of the dance—both, a prayer.

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In my early days of dancing in churches, I was primarily involved in creating technical, presentational pieces—often solos. I still love doing this because it allows me to use my technique, and the dance is always a prayer as I enter the space. I pray that I may be a vessel for the Holy Spirit and that the dance may touch those gathered, to uplift and renew, to open up scripture, to heal and transform, to communicate the love of God. When I

dance, I experience the present moment in its purest form, and praying is the closest thing to dancing that I know. I would say that when I truly pray, I experience a similar sensation of the present moment, of being connected to life, to God, rooted in who I am, empowered by my sense of self where God’s Spirit lives. I think that ultimately, when I am truly praying, truly in relationship with God, then what I am actually doing is listening. The essence of embodied prayer as dance is listening.

In more recent years I have begun to move from presentational solo pieces to dance that involves the whole community. At Wesley Seminary, my thesis was a huge community dance event, the culmination of four years of study on eight biblical matriarchs. I wove together through dance the stories of Eve, Sarah, Hagar, Rachel, Leah, Ruth, Naomi, and Mary, Jesus’ mother, a rich tapestry that included professional dancers, “nondancers,” a pick-up choir with drummers, and a cast of ushers. Some thirty people performed or assisted in the outdoor event that took place in April 2005. The dances that comprised the concert were not

in the context of worship; but as sacred dances delving into biblical themes, any of them could be danced in a worship service or as a kick-off to a Bible study series. The dance that always stands out in my mind is the piece on Sarah and Hagar, and I wish to offer it up here as an example of what can happen when people of diverse backgrounds dance together.

“The Making of a Matriarch” was first performed in 2002, and the cast then included myself, a Jewish college student, two fellow students who played Isaac and Ishmael, a member of Cokesbury’s staff (Abraham), and the dean of the seminary as the angel. The dance took place in Wesley’s central courtyard, so throughout rehearsals we provoked questions and delighted many students and faculty traveling between buildings on spring days. The story was in the air, in the midst of the community; unlikely conversations arose and midrash was birthed. But the most amazing outcome was that people who did not know each other became dear friends in the course of very few rehearsals. There is something that happens between people who dance together. Barriers break down; deep listening occurs. Trust forms in a way that cannot exactly be replicated through words. Friendships are formed. Passing dancer friends in a class, church, or on the street you exchange a peace or understanding that is like a secret handshake. I have danced with her. I know her. The effects of dance and movement in worshiping congregations are far-reaching. A small group of church members who occasionally or regularly dance together become knit together, and their ministry has a great impact on people. Imagine session meetings following worship where you have held hands, put arms on shoulders, clapped together, and even performed simple movement prayers as a community. The power struggles can cease. Dance, movement, and even simple embodied acts in worship equalize us and set us free to be the people God created us to be.

At the 2006 Montreat music and worship conferences, I, along with Charles Ryu and Tara Seabrook, taught dance classes and partnered with the other worship leaders to model the many and varied ways dance and movement can be a part of liturgy. The thousand people attending daily worship took part in congregational movement and experienced dramatic movement prayers, danced processions, an anthem, and interpretation of scripture. Each person who came to dance class had the opportunity to lead congregational movement or dance in worship if their schedules allowed for an extra rehearsal. The responses from conference participants in our classes and in the pews were amazing. Presbyterians were dancing and clapping and rejoicing. Arms were lifted and prayers were expressed through our muscles and bones. People are hungry for movement.

The glorious news is that our awareness is beginning to shift. As we become a more global church, with travel between continents now commonplace, music from other cultures brings with it different rhythms and energy. As churches in the United States diversify and grow in response to changing neighborhoods, we bear the name Reformed and *reforming* proudly. As the needs of younger generations become clear—those who are growing up in much more experience-based, visually oriented education systems—the church breathes a deep breath and begins to marry innovation with tradition. The Presbyterian Church is slowly becoming embodied, and it is a remarkable time for the flowering of dance and movement in worship. Churches are willing.

I created “Heartbeat,” the opening prayer described at the start of this article, in response to a comment I heard at the annual *Image* conference on religion and the arts in November 2005. Nicholas Wolterstorff said that at its best, the church is like a heartbeat, gathering

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and dispersing. If we simply focus inward, we fold in upon ourselves and cease to be the church. It is the dynamic action of relationship with the community around us, receiving and giving, that through the Holy Spirit shapes us into Christ's body for the world. If we are containers for God's Spirit, corporately and individually—each body a temple—then we become instruments of God's grace. Let us make a path in our worshiping life together for God's Spirit to travel from our heart to our breath to our muscles to our bones and out our limbs. In the fullness of the One who came to give us life, let us honor and embrace the wisdom of the body so that we may be a living testimony to God's love for humanity. In the words of the dancing matriarch, Carla De Sola, I am bold to pray

... that everyone, sitting cramped inside a pew, body lifeless, spine sagging and suffering, weary with weight and deadness, will be given space in which to breathe and move, will be wooed to worship with beauty and stillness, song and dance—dance charged with life, dance that lifts up both body and spirit, and we will be a holy, dancing, loving, praying and praising people. Amen.¹³

Notes

1. Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 256.
2. Mary T. Prokes, *Toward a Theology of the Body* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 59.
3. Moltmann, 259.
4. *Ibid.*, 257.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 258.
7. From a lecture given by Judith Rock at Andover Newton Theological School, Newton Centre, MA, in March 2002.
8. Carolyn Deitering, *The Liturgy as Dance and the Liturgical Dancer* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1984), 9.
9. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Order*, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II, 2005–2007 (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2005), W-2.1005.
10. Deitering, 11.
11. Michelle Ava, Response to “What Is Dance?” in *Bourgeon: D.C. Journal of Dance* 2, 1 (Feb. 14, 2006).
12. Carla De Sola, *The Spirit Moves: Handbook of Dance and Prayer* (Richmond, CA: Sharing Co., 1977), 11.
13. *Ibid.*, 9.



*Kathryn Sparks and Brianne Barrow, Wesley Seminary, 2005.
Photo by Jim Coates.*