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Argentine Tango

an invitation
to be fully present



'This is love: ... to take a step without feet.'
-Rumi

the invitation

In Matthew 11, we catch Jesus at a moment of exasperation. His patience is running thin: "To what can I compare this generation?" He likens his audience to children playing in the marketplace: "We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn." It must have been a game John and Jesus used to play as children. I play you a song and you respond with interpreting the song. Sad songs should inspire wailing, happy songs dancin'g. But now, that they are no longer children, their invitation in the marketplaces is not heard. John the Baptist sings his fellow citizens' dirge. But his prophetic denouncement of corruption and injustice does not evoke any wailing. To add insult to injury, they discredit his authority by accusing him of being demon possessed. Jesus plays the pipe for them, inviting them to a dance. But his messianic announcements of God's kingdom having arrived among them does not prompt any dancing and celebration. Instead he is being discredited with being a glutton and drunkard. John and Jesus cannot win: The first is perceived to be too negative and pessimistic, the latter too positive and optimistic! The one too judgmental and despairing, the other too compassionate and hopeful! The one too ascetic and sombre, the other too extravagant and exuberant! Ministry can be a mine field. With some you cannot win. Their concern is to maintain the status quo, and to avoid what they would consider an extreme positioning, an emotional overstatement, a dangerous overreaction. John wants to be more than a tourist attraction or a relic of old time religion at the river Jordan. Jesus wants to be more than an entertainer, a maverick, or interesting interlocutor. John wants to rattle and prepare a path through the confusing wilderness. Jesus wants to engage, unsettle, and inspire concrete steps into a new realm where God's justice and freedom are once again experienced in all the relationships that make up our lives. Jeremy Rifkin, an economic and social theorist, pleads for an 'empathic revolution'. According to our Gospel reading, such empathy is willing to respond to both lament and celebration, knows when to wail and when to dance, is not afraid to be outraged or to be exhilarated.



Today's opening piece by Astor Piazzolla, 'Vuelvo Al Sur' is an invitation to dance the Argentine tango and to connect with the yearning the music and the words evoke. We keep dreaming and singing about a return to "the South", a symbol for love, for homecoming, for "heaven on earth" for deep connection and community, for a place where we can be with both our desires and fears, where body and spirit find each other, with all that has been and all that will be. The music invites us to enter into the steady rhythm of the song that is able to carry us forward. The bandoneon wails, laments the state of the heart. The deep baritone voice of Piazzolla gives the steady movement urgency and immediacy. It moves our procession and the entry of God's Word forward. Our Holy Scriptures are accompanied by Denise and James dancing the tango in the opposite aisle. The dance is not just between two people. It signals our continuous dialogue with our Judeo-Christian heritage. It incites us to think of our relationships with ourselves, with each other, with creation, and ultimately with God as a continuous dance. And it is along those lines that the opening hymn "Lord of the dance" imagines Jesus's life and ministry as a dance with both his friends and opponents, with despair and hope, with life and death. And to share the peace with each other in a Tango embrace reminds us that we cannot simply think ourselves into a new way of being with each other, but have to be bold enough to live into such vision of a new humanity at peace, the prophetic dream of Shalom. The opening prayer by Michael Leunig gives further direction and depth to such embrace:

'Let us be serious. Face to face. Heart to heart. Let us be fully present. Strongly present. Deeply serious. The closest we may come to innocence.'

The Argentine Tango calls for such a heart-felt seriousness and presence. How wonderful to think of such presence as a way of

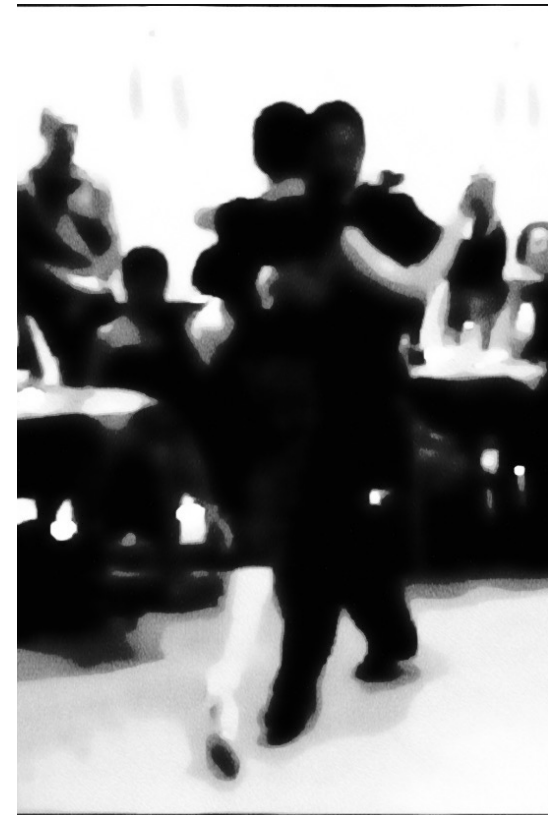
moving closer to innocence. What would it be like to dance the tango with John the Baptist or with Jesus? What would it be like to watch the two of them dance? They might very well have done so at one of the family weddings. These are not childish Sunday School fantasies, but rather emerge from what Paul Ricoeur coined "a second naivety". We have worked ourselves through the wilderness of critical questioning, guided by a hermeneutics of suspicion. But we know that this is not the promised land. It takes another crossing, another bold return, that calls for a renewed trust in the simple (not simplistic!) truths of life and love.

There is a difference between being childish or being childlike. There is a difference between ignorance and innocence. It is about leaning into trust despite every reason not to do so. It is about giving love another chance, despite all the disappointments. The music begins to play. We can accept or decline. But the invitation stands, now for more than 2000 years. The orchestra keeps playing. The melody has not lost its urgency. And the tune keeps inviting us to get into a different rhythm, that honours our deep inner yearnings for Shalom. We do not initiate the dance. We respond to it and enter into it. The dance has been there, has always been there: "Let there be light." And the response was: "And there was light." The liturgical rhythm of call and response goes back to a primordial exchange and is echoed in the invitation the music sends out. But to step onto the floor, to enter the stage, is to make oneself extremely vulnerable. We expose ourselves to others and their judgments: John, why do you dance with the devil on your back? Jesus, how dare you dance with sinners and prostitutes! To step up to our calling is to step out, to allow ourselves to be seen. At that moment, we rely on the invitation to take us into an embrace that will not crush us, but hold us and enfold us. Discipleship is no solo act. And it takes more than two to tango. There is always the music setting the scene and issuing an invitation.

living metaphors

No, you do not need to be a dancer, and certainly not an Argentine tango dancer to be able to appreciate this service. For some, this might be a little nudge to get into dancing. But more importantly, I invite you to being open to explore new metaphors for discipleship and spirituality. The power of metaphor is to defamiliarize, to make strange what has become too familiar, what cannot any longer move or unsettle us. Metaphors have the power to energize us. Think of the many parables Jesus employed to help us understand the nature of the kingdom of God. His comparisons both mystify and reveal. He invites us to imagine ourselves as trees, sheep, salt, and light. We are invited to identify ourselves with the prodigal son and the good Samaritan. We are to become children all over again, begin experimenting with different scripts and slipping into different roles. Issues of justice and equality are worked out around a table, during the sharing of a meal, which is both concrete and symbolic in its anticipation of God's Shalom as a rousing wedding feast.

No feast without a dance. No discipleship without Jesus, the piper, inviting us to respond and interpret his tune with our own movements. It is an accepted truth by now that we do not simply think ourselves into a new way of living and being. We rather live into a new truth, a new self-understanding, a new way of being in relationship, a new way of seeing the world. We live into it by accepting the invitation, trusting the embrace, and taking the first steps. Philosophically speaking, every form of dance expresses a certain way of being in the world, a certain way of feeling the world. It gives expression to our desire for connection, for movement, for creating something together. The beauty of the Argentine tango is that it does not simplify and stereotype relationship. To the contrary: It highlights and even intensifies both the frustrating and elating elements of being in relationship. Tango is in that sense a demanding teacher. And just as our own yearning for connection is compromised and troubled, the history and nature of tango is tangled and convoluted.



The Tango originated in the 19th century among people who were uprooted and in some ways homeless. In the quickly growing slums of Buenos Aires, two groups of people clashed with each other: The Argentinian farming communities and the European immigrants. Both were looking for work in the big cities. It is in this context, a melting pot of different cultures and languages, that the Tango comes into existence. The dance is closely linked to the city's night life and to those suburban brothels of Buenos Aires, which could afford a small musical ensemble. Male bravado and elegant appearance were part of the initial package. As the Argentine tango made its way into the Parisian salons, with the legendary Carols Gardel being one of its prominent singers and dancers, it moved beyond its original dingy milieu and became established across all classes of society. It is important to remember that Jesus was 'othered' a glutton and drunkard, a friend of sinners and prostitutes. The religious upper class considered his company unacceptable and the milieu within which he moved despicable. But it is among those who had no status and were regarded the scum of earth, that the news of God's coming was received enthusiastically and passionately. When the orchestra begins to play an Argentine tango, the room is filled with an energy and passion, that speaks to my deep yearning to be fully alive. I imagine Jesus' presence and invitation to have been just as electrifying, stirring up radical hopes and dreams.

the embrace

The invitation is followed by the upper body being held in a close embrace. Pelvis and feet always keep a proper distance, unlike in the ballroom tango with its broad

movements of the upper body (sways and dips) and hips connected to each other. While the centre of gravity is shifted forward significantly, the spine remains straight and one's own axis is maintained. It is about leaning into each other without leaning on each other. It is about presenting yourself and, to offer enough resistance, so that communication can flow between the leader and the follower. Such a presentation signals presence and commitment to the dance. I remember how during one of our congregation's tango & relationship workshops our teacher and facilitator Rosemary Shapiro received a late night call from one of the participants. She had been divorced recently and angry at her former husband. It was during the workshop, when Rosemary challenged her to present herself and to offer more resistance, that she realized that she could not keep blaming only her partner for the breakdown of their relationship. She had to take more responsibility and examine more critically her own role in the relationship. Presentation and presence are important, in all of our relationships that make up our personal and professional lives. A certain degree of resistance is about confidence and focus, about not being a push over and taking a clear stand.



The dance cannot flow without both parties being fully committed to creating something together. Attempts to show off to the partner or to the audience are counter-productive and will inhibit the flow of the dance. The dance can bring out the best or worst in another person and provides ample opportunities for projections and blaming. At times, the teacher on the floor has to help contain a crisis without being seen to intervene or take sides. Sometimes things have to get worse before they can get better. Important is not to give up and to trust the process.

This fundamental aspect of the dance reminds me of the Jewish chutzpah to imagine our relationship with God not as a monologue, but as a dialogue. We are presented with a cloud of witnesses that were not afraid to offer resistance for the sake of justice and God's own reputation. Abraham negotiated with God on behalf of the innocent outside the gates of Sodom and Gomorrah. Job did not simply accept his suffering and submit to a dark fate, but stood his ground, cursed his day of birth and challenged both his theological friends and God. The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber described it as the wonder and beauty of an "I-Thou" relationship. It invites engagement and conversation, heart to heart and constant negotiation.

heart to heart

Despite its intricate and elegant foot work, it is not a dance of the steps, but of the heart and the spine. The impulse for the movement comes from the body's centre. It deeply resonates with Rumi's understanding of love, "... to take a step without feet." Relationships involve a crossing, a movement, that begins in the heart and with the heart. Everything else follows that impulse.

In the tango you dance heart to heart. The impulse comes from the axis of the leader and is received in the follower's centre, who does not give in with the upper body, but allows the impulse to flow into the stretching or elongation of the step. I remember how Rosemary Shapiro took us through this experience of a heart to heart connection in the dance. She asked us to take a balloon and to hold it between our hearts while dancing. The challenge was to offer enough resistance and presence to keep the balloon in place throughout the dance.

The heart to heart connection speaks to me of a faith that does not evoke fear, but trust. Henri Nouwen beautifully envisaged our spiritual journey as one from the house of fear to the house of love. And Richard Rohr keeps reminding us that God loves us not if we change, but so that we can change. Such an approach to the spiritual journey resonates with the First Letter of John's conviction that "love drives out all fear." Genuine transformation only happens in a context of acceptance, where no threats or ultimatums are issued. But sadly, we keep witnessing resurgences of forms of religion that terrorize its believers and heavily rely on the fear factor to generate blind submission and compliance. Jesus's approach to teach through parables speaks a different language, one of dialogue, of exploration, and not of indoctrination. Those deemed beyond salvation, become the focus of his attention. The invitation is unconditional and the desire for change is the result and not the precondition for an intimate communion around the table. But we keep turning around the sequence of events. All too often our invitation and generosity is conditional.

constant negotiation



The foundation for all the various combinations is the walking ('caminar'). To walk the tango is to dance the tango. I remember how the first sessions of Argentine tango with Mark Hoeben were simply spent with walking to the rhythm of the music, first individually and then together as a couple. To walk is 'to gently caress the earth with your feet.' ('Es como cariciar la tierra.') The steps do not follow set patterns, that simply need to be reproduced. But each step always remains open to change as both in content and expression. This creates the extraordinary space for improvisation and endless possibilities. For the dance to flow both leader and follower need to become good listeners, able to give and receive. The leader invites. The follower has the choice to accept, resist, return the invite or decorate. We speak of a leader and a follower, but in the end, it is a matter of perspective and personality: Ideally the movements of the leaders find their fulfilment and ultimate expression in the follower's creative response. At that point, all the leader can do is to accompany, frame and accentuate the follower's development of the dance. The German languages lends itself to a word play: What we observe is a constant 'Führen und Verführen'. It is the intricate entanglement of 'leading and seducing'. When the dance flows, who is in control? The give-and-take begins to dissolve the rigid roles and expectations and finds synthesis at a higher level.

It is remarkable that in John's Gospel Jesus makes a point in calling us friends, and not servants. Servants simply obey. Friends are expected to show their integrity through both loyalty and honesty. Friends are not afraid to challenge each other, to disagree, to argue and debate, to resist and hesitate. As mentioned before, to teach in parables, is to invite discussion and disagreement. Among friends there are no assigned and set roles of leader and follower. To ask one's followers, "Who do you think I am" (Mark 8), is not a rhetorical question, but an acknowledgement that our sense of identity and being is developed and found in relation to those around us, especially those who love us and believe in us. It involves an intricate dance, where we move each other into a deeper self-understanding and encourage each other to find our own particular calling.

the art of 'disappointment'

A good partner has the task to keep 'disappointing' the expectation of the other. Disappointment in tango is meant in a positive sense, as in unpredictability. The more predictable the leader is, the more he or she will lose the ability to lead. Predictability creates boredom and radically reduces the possibilities of the dance. The challenge for the leader is to create positive disappointments, until the follower gives up to predict what comes next. What a wonderful challenge, to remain fully present and open to whatever arrives. But the ability to disappoint presupposes that enough trust in the leader's competence has been established. An unpredictability which evokes insecurity and stress undermines the dance and only creates frustrations.

Jesus kept disappointing not only the religious leaders of time, but also his own teacher and circle of friends. It was from prison, that John the Baptist asked, "Are you the one?" He expected the end of times, a Messiah that would bring about judgement day. Later on, Peter was rebuked for casting him in the role of a militant Messiah, who would assume power by the sword (Mark 8). Such expectations prevailed among his followers and led to constant misunderstandings and frustrations on both sides. So much of church history reveals the constant struggle to remember that the risen Christ is the crucified Jesus. They cannot be separated and have to be kept in a constructive tension. Jesus's decision to rather suffer violence than inflict violence, to resist evil non-violently, to stay in the place of love at all cost, remains a continuous provocation to those of us who are quick to compromise. It also translates into our difficulty to move from retributive to restorative justice. The words and ministry of Jesus remain unpredictable and keep a radical and uncomfortable edge as long as we keep following Dietrich Bonhoeffer's advice, to read the Scriptures not for us, but against us.

seeking union

It has been suggested that, 'tango are two serious faces and two buttocks, that amuse themselves.' It speaks of the kind of contrasts and polarities that are characteristic of the whole dance: distance

versus intimacy, heart versus steps, delay versus acceleration, body versus spirit, calmness versus activity, absence versus presence, autonomy versus unity, calmness versus business. The dance strives towards an experience of union, a form of resolution. But such an experience always remains a brief moment in the flow of the dance, which resists the experience of ever having arrived. Such union has to be won over again and again, always at risk, never a given, and in some ways an impossible possibility.

Such delicate balance is based on being attentive to the axis, the centre of the partner. Everyone is responsible for his or her own balance. You do not lean onto each other for balance, but you lean only as far as you can still hold your own balance and autonomy. The two dancers direct their movement in a way, that does not limit the freedom of movement of the other, while at the same time aiming for intimacy. Two independent human beings, deeply connected with each other, and yet standing on their own feet, independent and autonomous. In some ways, the two dancers become guardians of the each other's freedom and autonomy, while acknowledging that they need each other to complete the dance. This interplay between autonomy and freedom resonates with the Gospel's understanding of freedom: We are not called to be free from each other, but rather free for each other. It is a freedom characterized by a deep respect for both our difference and our interconnectedness.



the dance of life

The irony is that one can find Argentine tango too daunting and challenging. But this would mean to be oblivious of the complexities of the more general dance of life with all its different relationships and dynamics. The body never lies and reveals our resistances, insecurities and imbalances. When we say that it takes two to tango, we remind ourselves that a crisis always involves two parties. No one side can be blamed for a breakdown in relationship. We rely on mechanisms of denial in life, and we bring them to the dancing floor. Such strategies of denials help us to hide past pain and wounding. But in the dance, they show up and call for acceptance, empathy, and forgiveness. It takes courage and curiosity to step onto the dancing floor. And where there is a vision, there is a commitment to make it work.

In our opening hymn 'Lord of the dance' Jesus is imagined to be in a dance with both his friends and his enemies, with both life and death, with both despair and hope. What if we bring the metaphor of the dance to all the relationships we find ourselves in? It is an invitation to allow the Argentine tango to inform all the different elements and dynamics at play when we interact with ourselves, each other, with creation, and with God. For the dance of life always involves invitation, embrace, heart to heart, constant negotiation, positive disappointment, and a desire for union.

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