

Bad Luck Streak at Dancing School

Michigan Annual Conference
Opening Sermon

June 1, 2022
Bishop David Alan Bard

Texts: Psalm 30:1-12; Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:28-30

Greetings in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the peace and power of God's Spirit. At my second annual conference with you, I greeted you with "You came back!" Given all our anxieties and concerns, I want to simply celebrate, "You Came!" It is wonderful to be together again, in person.

"And are we yet alive, and see each others' masks" There is not really a good rhyme to end that verse. The word "flask" works, but is not terribly ecclesial, though I did use it as a starter for Wordle recently and got the word in three.

It is good to be together even amid health protocols, anxieties and apprehensions. Thank you for observing our protocols. Our last in-person annual conference was our special session in early March of 2020, and a week later I was asking churches not to meet in person because of the spread of the coronavirus. I thank God that that annual conference did not become an early super spreader event. I'd like to keep this annual conference from becoming one, and thank you for doing your part.

It's been over two years since we have been together. A lot have been going on. General Conference has been postponed three time and our denominational separation lingers. I am in my sixth year of my four-year assignment as bishop for the Michigan area. Electoral politics in this country have moved further away from ideals of dialogical and deliberative democracy. George Floyd's killing in Minneapolis, two years ago last week, created a wave of

work toward a deep racial reckoning, work that remains important but that has also been challenged. Violence is increasing. Just recently we witnessed horrific incidents in Buffalo, New York and Uvalde, Texas. We are aware of daily violence in too many places. Overdose deaths have reached new highs.

One of the books that came into my hands during these past couple of years was a book of lost writings from Franz Kafka: *A delicate matter, this tiptoeing across a crumbling board set down as a bridge, nothing underfoot, having to scrape together with your feet the ground you are treading on, walking on nothing but your reflection down in the water below, holding the world together with your feet, your hands cramping at the air to survive this ordeal.* (Franz Kafka, The Lost Writings. Selected and with an afterward by Reiner Stach, translated by Michael Hofmann. New York: New Directions, 2020.). Perhaps you wish that one would have stayed lost.

That brief vignette expresses struggle and heartache and echoes of mourning. Since we last met have you ever felt like you were tiptoeing across a crumbling board set down as a bridge, nothing underfoot, having to scrape together with your feet the ground you are treading on, walking on nothing but your reflection down in the water below, holding the world together with your feet, your hands cramping at the air to survive this ordeal? I think of the Peter Frampton song, “Do You Feel Like We Do?” Did you ever feel a bit like the Kafka scenario in these past couple of years?

The rather mysterious sermon title, “Bad Luck Streak in Dancing School” is from that same era as “Frampton Comes Alive.” I borrowed it from an album title chosen by Warren Zevon. It seems to capture the theme of annual conference “Mourning to Dancing.” Warren

Zevon often focused on life's difficulties in his music. He is more well-known for the record just before "Bad Luck Streak in Dancing School" – "Excitable Boy" with the song "Werewolves of London." Another song on that earlier album also speaks to me at times these days – "Lawyers, Guns and Money." "Lawyers, Guns and Money" is a song about a mercenary for hire who is in a foreign country and things are going badly. He is sending a wire for help: "send lawyers, guns and money, [things] have hit the fan." The phrase is pure metaphor, but there are times when things can feel that desperate.

We have been through a lot, are going through a lot, a lot is hitting the fan. We live in a time filled with unkindness, raging conspiracy theories, deep divisiveness, craziness of all kinds – and that's just The United Methodist Church – that's only somewhat tongue-in-cheek. I don't repeat sermons, but sometimes thoughts, and that one got the same uncomfortable chuckle in Minnesota last week. We live in a world where war rages, diseases flourish, hunger abounds, climate is damaged. We live in a world where an eighteen-year-old, armed to the teeth can kill ten people and wound others at a grocery store in Buffalo, motivated by racial hatred; and another eighteen year old, armed with a semi-automatic rifle can go in to an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas and kill nineteen children, and we don't seem to have the creative moral imagination or moral courage to even engage in new conversations about what might actually help. It's getting hard to imagine Warren Zevon's song being as innocent as it was in the 1970s. We've hit a bad luck streak in dancing school. Maybe the dancing school is now a temporary shelter for war, pain, disaster.

The Bible knows that in human life there will be reasons for discouragement and disappointment, even despair. The Bible is filled with passages of mourning and lament.

Biblical realism recognizes that life can be difficult, and that the world is not yet God's dream for it, often not even close. We hear echoes of lament and mourning in Psalm 30. "O Lord, my God, I cried to you for help.... You brought me up out of Sheol." This person has felt like they were in the place of the dead, and raises a question with God. "What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?" When you are telling God, "Aren't I better than dust," things are not going well. Other Psalms likewise cry out. "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all day long?" I can hear the parents of children in Uvalde cry out with those words from Psalm 13.

The world is not yet God's dream for it. The kingdom has not yet come on earth as in heaven. So we lament. So we mourn. We mourn war. We mourn violence. We mourn hungry children. We mourn dead children. We mourn vast inequities. We mourn the way we draw circles of in and out in the human community – of inclusion and exclusion, sometimes to the point of denying the essential humanity of another because of how they speak or how they look or where they were born or their identity or their orientation. We mourn our own complicity in the brokenness of the world. We mourn our collective lack of courage and moral imagination to honestly address our violence. We mourn our collective lack of courage and moral imagination to honestly grapple with our complicated history.

The poet Claudia Rankine shares the story of two friends, mothers. *A friend recently told me that when she gave birth to her son, before naming him, before even nursing him, her first thought was, I have to get him out of this country.... I asked another friend what it's like being the mother of a black son. "The condition of black life is one of mourning."* Claudia

Rankine is a poet, and she and her friends are all Black women living in the United States. She writes in her essay, “The Condition of Black Life is Mourning”: *Having coffee, walking the dog, reading the paper, taking the elevator to the office, dropping the kids off at school: All of this good life is surrounded by the ambient feeling that at any given moment, a black person is being killed in the street or in his home by the armed hatred of a fellow American.* (The Fire This Time, 145, 150). The essay was published in 2016, after Charleston and the Mother Emmanuel AME church shooting, but before George Floyd or Ahmaud Arbery or Daunte Wright or Patrick Lyoya.

I have heard mothers speak since Tuesday of that ambient feeling of dread while dropping their children off at school. Uvalde joins Parkland and Sandy Hook and Oxford.

Friends, if we are to be in ministry to this hurting world, ministry for Jesus Christ, ministry in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, ministry with Jesus Christ, we need to hear the mourning of the world, hear the cries, feel the pain and anguish, mourn. Mourn not just when our collective conscience is shattered by such brutal mass shootings as we have witnessed in recent weeks, but mourn the premature death of every child by violence. Bad luck streak in dancing school indeed. I might even pose the question, if we are not spending some significant time in mourning and lament in this world in which we live, how alive are we?

And if we are to be in ministry in this hurting world, the world that is not yet God’s dream for it, be in ministry for Jesus Christ, ministry in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, ministry with Jesus Christ, we also need to trust that God is at work in this broken world, in this troubled time. God is at work in the world and in human lives so as not to leave us in mourning. The cries we hear and the pain we feel will not simply vanish. The cries will echo, but the winds of God’s healing, loving, grace-filled Spirit bring other voices, stronger voices. Perhaps it is like

those gestalt visuals – focus one way and you see a vase, focus another and you see two faces. The mourning does not disappear, but dancing comes to the foreground. “You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy” (Psalm 30:11). Eugene Peterson: “You changed wild lament into whirling dance; you ripped off my black mourning band and decked me with wildflowers.” The bad luck streak at dancing school is turned into a grand ball where everyone is welcome to cut a rug.

We trust, as followers of Jesus Christ, as people who have encountered the transforming power of God’s love and grace in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, that God is at work. God is up to something. God is always up to something new. We trust that God is up to something new, even when it seems the world is moving backward, away from God’s purposes, away from God’s dream for the world. We trust that God is up to something new, even when hate reappears in stunning violence, ten dead simply out grocery shopping, nineteen children killed just going to school. We trust that God is up to something new, so we dance.

The prophet Isaiah sees the wilderness and dry land and desert. The prophet also understands that God is always up to something new. “The wilderness and dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus, it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.... For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.” “So strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees” – and dance. I added that last part. Formerly feeble knees now firm should dance.

God is up to something new even in the midst of a painful and prolonged separation within Methodism. God is up to something new in the UMC. As I wrote in my May blog: *The*

United Methodist Church, moving into the future, will continue to focus on making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We will be a church that works to include all persons and to make changes so that the church better reflects the beautiful diversity of God's people and builds beloved community. We will continue to have global connections and global impact. We will continue to help people connect more deeply with God through Jesus Christ and be open to new ways to do that through worship, spiritual disciplines, and building community. Through and following whatever separation will happen, The United Methodist Church will continue to change to meet the needs of new people, new generations, and a changing world. We don't know all of what that will look like. I trust that God is up to something new in the Global Methodist Church, and that will be their story to tell. We trust that God is up to something new, even in our dividedness and brokenness, so we dance.

God is up to something new in the Michigan Conference. Yes, I see that we will likely have declining resources for a time, fewer churches, smaller staff. And we have affirmed a direction. We will work toward vital congregations led by vibrant leaders who have a burning desire to share God's love and invite people to the journey with Jesus, a journey that heals and frees. We will work to build beloved community in our congregations and in our world. That means working to break down dividing walls. It means increasing our intercultural competence, and rooting out the long tentacles of racialized thinking in our souls and in our systems. We will develop the vibrant leaders we need and look for how God is calling people from the rich diversity of humanity to lead the church into the future. We will be good stewards of our resources, developing and encouraging generosity and looking for new and creative ways to

finance emerging ministry projects. The Michigan Conference has a vision and a direction and we trust that God is up to something new in all this. So we dance.

And even in this world which can feel so discouraging, appear so broken, seem so distant from God's dream for it, we trust that God is up to something. God is up to something new. When I baptized our granddaughter, Eleonora on May 15 in Duluth, one of the songs for the morning was the Mark Miller and Laurie Zelman song – "Welcome". "Let's walk together for awhile and ask where we begin to build a world where love can grow and hope can enter in, to be the hands of healing and to plant the seeds of peace. Let's talk together of a time when we will share a feast, where pride and power kneel to serve the lonely and the least, and joy will set the table as we join our hands to pray. Let's dream together of the day when earth and heaven are one, a city built of love and light, the new Jerusalem, where our mourning turns to dancing, every creature lifts its voice: Singing welcome, welcome to this place." God is up to something new in creating those kind of places and spaces in the world, and the church is called upon to lead the way, to walk, and talk, and dream. So we dance.

Jesus issues the invitation. "Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gently and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." I love how Eugene Peterson renders part of this verse. "Learn the unforced rhythms of grace." Come to me you who've been tiptoeing across a crumbling board set down as a bridge, nothing underfoot, having to scrape together with your feet the ground you are treading on, walking on nothing but your reflection down in the water below, holding the world together with your feet, your hands cramping at the air to survive this ordeal. Learn the unforced

rhythms of grace. Come to me, you who mourn deeply for a world so violent and broken. I am making all things new. Come, dance to the unforced rhythms of grace.

Wrapping up. 1959 was an astonishing year for jazz. Ornette Coleman, Charles Mingus, John Coltrane, Miles Davis and Dave Brubeck all released or recorded seminal jazz albums. Miles Davis, "Kind of Blue" is the best-selling jazz album of all time and Dave Brubeck's song "Take Five" from his album Time Out is the best-selling jazz single ever. Almost fifty years after it was released Brubeck reflected on his album, "Time Out" with its hit single, "Take Five" in an interview. He noted that Columbia records was reticent to release the album when they first heard it. The proposed album cover was an abstract painting by Sadamitsu Fujita. All of the songs were original compositions, no familiar jazz standards. And the songs were experiments in different time signatures, experiments in rhythm. Who would or could dance to it? But dance they did. Brubeck fondly recalled: "Detroit was a great place to play in a dance hall. Boy, could they dance in 5/4 time. They could dance to anything we'd play."

Detroit could dance. Michigan could dance. Michigan conference, we can dance. We can dance to the unlikely tune of God's Spirit, decked out in wildflowers. God is up to something. God is up to something new. So we dance.

God's newness can seem like odd time signatures. When cynicism is prevalent, God's time signature is hope. So we dance. When violence is ascendant, God's time signature is peace. So we dance. When divisiveness seems so strong, God's time signature reminds us of common humanity, of sharing in the image of God. So we dance.

Tough times. Difficult days. We know it. We feel it. To be in ministry we need to feel and mourn, and we need to dance. We feel the pain. We often have heavy hearts. Yet with

God, the mourning recedes in the gestalt. Dancing emerges. God is up to something. God is up to something new. And so we dance to the unforced rhythms of grace, to the strange time signatures of God's Spirit. Let the bad luck streak in dancing school be turned into a Detroit dance hall, or an Escanaba dance hall, or a Grand Rapids dance hall, or a Kalamazoo dance hall, or a wherever you are United Methodist in Michigan dance hall, in the name of Jesus. Amen.