

Dance As If No One is Watching

August 19, 2018

A great one died this week. Aretha Franklin was so much more than a Motown legend, so much more even than the Queen of Soul.

Coming up in her daddy's church in the 1940s and '50s, she came to embody so much of what this country has been about in her lifetime. Before all of the retrospectives this week, I hadn't realized that she was a PK. She's a preacher's kid, and being a PK often means that one's life is saturated in all things church. Very often, therefore, it usually means that there's a sharp pendulum swing – either someone is very active in their faith life, or very not. (I see a couple of PKs out there and you're laughing with me.) In Aretha's case, the nascent civil rights movement which was birthed in the black churches shines through.

One article that I read this week chronicled Aretha's hair, from straightened, and coiffed, and "managed" in her early career, to tightly cropped, to a soft, pillowy Afro as she came in to her own. It is said that she had pipes that could blow the doors off a church, and her signature song, "*Respect*," will go down through the ages not only as a civil rights and feminist anthem, but also as an icon in the religious sense. More than a symbol, religious icons are supposed to draw us in to help us to better understand the mystery of the sacred. So, too, I would argue with Aretha's "*Respect*." It's not just a classic, its iconic nature not only provides a window into the era in which it was created, I would argue that that song actually breeds respect. How many times has someone listened to it and stood a little taller, found the wherewithal to stand up for what is right, maybe even grown a little bit of a backbone?

Contrast that with the story from our Gospel today. Herod throws a birthday party for himself, and the text doesn't explicitly say this, but it was most likely a drunken bash. Herod was famous for his excesses, so he throws a drunken bash and late in the night he asks his stepdaughter to dance for him and his friends. Again, the text doesn't tell us what the dance was like, but we're not supposed to be imagining a Shirley Temple "*Good Ship Lollipop*" kind of dance. This is a young teen, dancing for her Dad's drunk friends. Yeah, we should be squirming. We're told here that Herod is so enamored of his stepdaughter's dancing that he tells her, "You can have anything you want. Anything." Barely having her own mind yet, she asks her mother Herodias' is advice.

Now, let's take a time out here for a second. It's important to have a little bit of back story here. Herodias is currently married to Herod, but had previously been married to Herod's brother, Philip. John the Baptist had been critical of Herod and Herodias's marriage presumably because she divorced Philip to marry up, to get ahead, to climb the social and political ladder.

So, back to the drunken bash. Herod's stepdaughter asks her mom, Herodias, what to ask for and Mom says, "John the Baptist's head on a platter." And Herod gives it to her because he doesn't want his friends to see him going back on his word. This is a horror story. It's a story rooted in greed, and self-preservation, and insecurity. It's a story of the fear of the truth, fear of appearing weak, and fear of what the neighbors will say.

Reverend Mike Piazza of First Presbyterian Church in New Canaan, Connecticut writes:

“Herod’s stepdaughter dances to someone else’s tune and uses her life’s energy, passion, and talent to gain the advantage. She, ultimately, dances to her mother’s tune, asking from life what her mother wants for her. To some extent, we all dance to the music our parents played for us.

“Herod’s stepdaughter was so driven by her need to please her mother that she didn’t hesitate to take the life of an innocent man. How often do we hurt those we love because we are dancing to old tunes that have left us angry or bruised?”

As Piazza tells it:

“Herod had no desire to execute John the Baptist. The prophet was no real threat to him, but losing face worried him. Perhaps even the king was dancing to the music of insecurity he had heard play in his heart since he was a child. He couldn’t appear weak before his guests, so he killed a holy man. Herod would be haunted by this for the rest of his life, even believing that Jesus was John come back to punish him.”

When we hold up Aretha and Herod’s stepdaughter to one another, we come up with a contrast in authenticity, of being true to oneself. One of the pieces that I watched this week about Aretha was the “60 Minutes” interview she did with Ed Bradley. For part of it, Aretha’s sitting at her piano and Bradley is asking her some probing questions about the suggestive and even overtly sexual nature of some of her songs. In the interview, you can see the poised, self-assured, grande dame shrink before your eyes. Her answers weren’t coquettish or even coy. She looked downright awkward and embarrassed. We’ll never know for sure, but I’d surmise a guess that there was something in that overt sexuality that Ms. Franklin wasn’t at peace with. At that point she was doing someone else’s dance, dancing to someone else’s drummer.

We heard of a third dancer today, too, in our passage from 2 Samuel which John read. We heard of David dancing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, dancing with unadulterated joy. David is over the moon. He is dancing in pure celebration, and this is a dance of love, of joy, of abandon. Unlike Herod, who questions what others will think, David is so exuberant that when his clothes fall off, he doesn’t even care that his wife is mortified.

In 1998, Luciano Pavarotti was scheduled to sing the rousing anthem from Turnadot, “*Nessun Dorma*,” at the Grammys but took ill. With barely an hour to rehearse, Aretha not only subbed in for Pavarotti, she breathed new life into that aria. Throughout her life, she sang songs of authenticity and grace, she sang songs that built people up. Even in “*Think*,” as she was taking her soon-to-be ex-husband down a few pegs, she empowered him at the same time. “You better think, think about what you’re trying to do to me.”

Friends, as we reflect on an inspiring life of song and two great spiritual dances, let us commit ourselves once again to lives of authenticity and honor. Let’s commit ourselves to dancing not to the tunes of our broken past, but to the tunes that lead us to a more soul-filled future. It’s tempting to dance the dances rooted in greed and self-preservation and insecurity, the dances of fear of the truth, fear of appearing weak, fear of what the neighbors will say. Friends, let’s

commit to following David's way, Aretha's way, of dancing the rhythm of freedom, to dancing as if no one is watching but God. Alleluia and Amen.

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2 Samuel 6:7-19; Mark 6:14-29
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