

Upside Down

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Introduction

This week we conclude our *Wesleyan Vile-tality* series. We have watched John Wesley climb down out of the safety of the pulpit and the church walls and preach in open fields, to coal miners and crowds who would never have set foot in a church. That was vile-tality in real life: Wesley let go of his own respectability so he could reach the people the respectable church had written off. This was a significant risk for Wesley, and that same risk of looking foolish can set us free.

When we quit worrying about how we look before God, we can stop policing the door, and the people we used to screen out start to find their way in. When we hold nothing back in praise, there is room for everyone to join the community of faith. Most of us know the quiet judgment that can take place in church. We have an instinctual understanding of who fits, who sits in their "assigned seats," and what we think is appropriate for church. We have felt the desire to keep things dignified, *and* we have felt the deeper desire to let all of that go.

This week as we conclude the series, we explore two passages that challenge our expectations. David dances with all his might in front of the ark, and Jesus blesses every small welcome offered in his name. With these, we may see that we are sent into the world in Jesus' name; we are sent for such a time as this; and we are sent to break the mold and to be more vile.

Illustration Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xtz-usSXaGg>

In this clip from Sister Act (1992), a convent choir begins a proper Sunday hymn and then changes the rhythm.

Why This Video?

A change to the music changes the mood of the room. When the singing is proper and contained, everyone keeps their place and the doors might as well be locked. Once it changes, people on the sidewalk hear it and ask what's going on. They are inspired to find out more! But those already on the inside, the people most invested in how worship is supposed to look, are the ones squirming in the front pew. It's as if the curious outsiders are a threat. When our expressions of faith get loud enough to hear from the street, do we lock the doors or open them wider?

Video Discussion Questions

1. What do you notice in the church before the music changes, and what happens when it does?
2. Watch the faces of the people listening. Whose joy is most visible, and whose faces show the most discomfort?
3. What do you imagine the people outside are hearing that makes them come closer? Is it just the music or is it something else?
4. The priest waves the newcomers in while the song is still going. Do you think this timing is important? Do you think their entry is disruptive? What does that timing say to you?
5. When the music ends, the room is split between delight and disapproval. Do you feel more delight at the way the clip ends, or do you disapprove? Would you feel differently if you were in the room?

2 Samuel 6:12-23 (NRSVue)

¹²It was told King David, "The LORD has blessed the household of Obed-edom and all that belongs to him because of the ark of God." So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing, ¹³and when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatted calf. ¹⁴David danced before the LORD with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. ¹⁵So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting and with the sound of the trumpet.

¹⁶As the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD, and she despised him in her heart. ¹⁷They brought in the ark of the LORD and set it in its place, inside the tent that David had pitched for it, and David offered burnt offerings and offerings of well-being before the LORD.

¹⁸When David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of hosts ¹⁹and distributed food among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins. Then all the people went back to their homes.

²⁰David returned to bless his household. But Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David and said, "How the king of Israel honored himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants' maids, as any vulgar fellow might shamelessly uncover himself!" ²¹David said to Michal, "It was before the LORD, who chose me in place of your father and all his household, to appoint me as prince over Israel, the people of the LORD—I will dance before the LORD. ²²I will make myself yet more contemptible than this, and I will be abased in my own eyes, but by the maids of whom you have spoken, by them I shall be held in honor." ²³And Michal daughter of Saul had no child to the day of her death.

Matthew 10:40-42 (NRSVue)

⁴⁰"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

⁴¹Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous, ⁴²and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

Scripture Study Questions

1. David dances "with all his might," wearing only a linen ephod. What does it look like to let go of your dignity like that, and what makes it so hard?
2. Michal watches from a window, at a distance from the celebration. How does keeping a safe, respectable distance change what a person is able to see?
3. Michal's complaint is about dignity and appearance before the "servants' maids." When have you felt the tug to keep your faith respectable, and whose approval were you most concerned about?
4. When Michal challenges him, David roots his dancing in the God who chose him and called him. How does remembering God's call reshape what we are willing to risk, and how foolish we are willing to look?
5. The chapter ends with Michal having no child, and the narrator offers no comment. In that culture, her childlessness would have been seen as a punishment. What could we lose if we cast her as a villain, and how could we see her with more compassion?

6. Like David under Michal's glare, have you ever drawn someone's disdain for worshiping or living your faith without holding back? How did that feel? What was the result?
7. In Matthew, Jesus connects the future reward to a small gesture, a cup of cold water for a little one. What does that say to you about how God receives small acts of service to others?
8. Compare these two passages. How do David's undignified joy and Jesus' open welcome become one call to *be* the church? Do you see any other parallels or connections?

Additional (Optional) Questions

1. Think back to the last time a visitor walked into our worshiping community. What do you think they experienced in the first five minutes?
2. What signals, spoken and unspoken, tell a visitor whether or not they belong here at La Jolla UMC?
3. Where does our faith community's life together show real joy, and where does it seem quiet or cautious about appearances?
4. If joy in worship drew a crowd you did not expect, what would you want to be ready to offer them?
5. What is one practice that would make our welcome visible from outside the walls of the church this month?
6. Where do our routines and our sense of how worship *should* look comfort us, and where do they hold us back from the bold, undignified faith David showed?

Weekly Action

This week, put our *Wesleyan Vile-tality* series into practice with one concrete step that breaks the mold of respectability.

- **Pray** each morning for freedom from worrying how you look, and for the courage to follow God past the bounds of what's expected.
- **Listen** for where you have kept your faith quiet and dignified. Examine one place (a relationship, a habit, a specific space) where you've played it safe.
- **Plan** one undignified step you can take. Welcome someone in a new way, be kind in a way that's unexpected, praise and worship without caring what people think. Make it specific and put it on your calendar!
- **Act** on your inspiration before Sunday, even if it might make you look foolish.
- **Share** what happened with a family member or trusted spiritual partner, and invite them to risk a step of their own.

Prayer

God of open doors, you dance ahead of us into every room we're afraid to enter. You go where the respectable will not, you draw strangers off the street into the circle of grace, and you delight when we let go of our dignity to follow you. Open our hearts. Make us a people willing to look foolish for you, to break the rules that keep us respectable, and to welcome everyone you send. Teach us to treasure the small kindnesses, and to know them as your own work in and through us. Inspire us to dance where the world expects us to sit still, and to gather where the world expects us to turn people away. We offer you our whole and unguarded selves. Amen.

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