

September 3, Ordinary 22A (Matthew 16:21–28)

Through Christ, God dances.

by [Amy Zietlow](#) in the [August 16, 2017](#) issue

I grew up dancing ballet. As a minister, I've incorporated teaching ballet in congregations I've served, while continuing to perform with a community dance company. And when you're a ballet dancer, late summer marks the beginning of something: *Nutcracker* rehearsals.

Midmonth, our director casts the show and begins distributing extensive notation for each dance, from the Dewdrop Fairy to the mouse corps. French terms, musical counts, and intricate stick drawings and configurations fill those pages. Until the first weekend in December, when we perform, the flat words on the page will serve as a map for the movement to follow.

In Matthew 16, I imagine a similar distribution process: Jesus hands out God's redemption choreography to the disciples. After Peter's impetuous confession that Jesus is the Messiah, perhaps Jesus thinks they are prepared for the challenge of this new dance.

Jesus describes a persistent *adagio* he will perform. It leads to Jerusalem, where the choreography will include trials (both legal and physical), the cross, death, and ultimately an empty tomb. While he will not leap off to Jerusalem yet, his words hold a promise that the tempo of this redemption dance will only increase in speed and intensity. His steps will not waiver. God has set the dance, and through Christ, God dances.

After setting his three-step combination of suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus pauses. He looks to the cast of disciples, but the dance they were expecting is gone. They stare at the words on the page, unable to imagine what the living of them will really look like. Taking up their crosses and following Jesus falls far from their original vision of earthly success, in which they join Jesus in a triumphant jig of glory.

The steps required in Jesus' path of redemptive sacrifice sound awkward, ugly, too risky—even fatal. Peter takes the first step, pulling Jesus aside. He holds Jesus close while rebuking his proposed plans. He wants Jesus to dance to a different tempo, to a different end. The choreography of Jesus offends and will cause injury to the director and the dancers. Their audience will not receive this dance with accolades and standing ovations. Peter knows the audience will boo, walk out, and protest this show.

Jesus responds in turn. His eyes remain on Peter, his spotting point, but his body shifts. The *port de bras* of his arm pushes Peter behind him in order to dance without hindrance. Peter is focused on a human dance and not a divine one.

Receiving my stack of choreography notes each fall can feel overwhelming. It is hard to translate the proposed choreography into actual movement as it passes through the lens of my technique, the coaching of our director, and the gifts and limits of the other dancers on the stage. It holds challenges I can't always anticipate. I have to trust our director's vision, her belief in my abilities, and my community of dancers who come with me on the journey of artistic expression.

I feel for those disciples trying to imagine what Jesus' words will actually look like embodied. They doubt the vision cast by their rabbi and director, and their traveling companions are deserters, deniers, and betrayers. Then, when Jesus offers words of encouragement, he speaks of a paradox where losing oneself in Christ means finding oneself, where one's soul holds a value far greater than gaining all of creation.

I imagine the disciples thinking, "Uh, Jesus, this dance is just getting harder. No one wants to do the 'take up your cross' dance!"

In the late 1990s, I sat in a classroom at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Anne Carr was at the helm of our table, directing our mental and spiritual movement through the words of Thomas Merton. I was drawn to Merton's candor in *The Sign of Jonas*, where he recounts the paradoxical work of finding oneself in Christ by losing oneself in the world. He wrote the following on February 17, 1957—Shrove Tuesday—as he prepared to make his solemn vows after five years at the monastery:

Yesterday morning I made my will. You always make a will before solemn vows, getting rid of everything, as if you were about to die. It sounds more

dramatic than it really is. As a matter of fact, as soon as I renounced all earthly things, I was called into Father Abbot's room and he presented me with a contract with Harcourt, Brace for the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. So after making my will I put my living signature on this contract. . . . Meanwhile, I spent the afternoon writing business letters and making all kinds of mistakes.

Merton's religious vocation resonated with me through the lens of my vocation in dance. Losing myself in music and movement was one way I truly felt like myself, but every class and performance included paradoxes: moments of great accomplishment, even mystical exhilaration, but also all kinds of mistakes. Nevertheless, I loved dance.

I said this in class. Carr smiled and encouraged me to read Merton's *New Seeds of Contemplation*, where he writes, "if we could let go of our own obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all, we might be able to hear [Christ's] call and follow Him in His mysterious, cosmic dance."

Can we follow the choreography of Jesus? Jesus invites the disciples, and us, to try. We will need a lot of rehearsal. To follow his steps requires sacrificing the human definitions of success that try to order our steps. We are invited to find our place on God's stage—to begin warming up, to turn around, and to follow Christ and not ourselves, a journey of both grace and mistakes.