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The Divine Embrace

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Designed by Jenny Swanson

Edited by Dave Lindstedt

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The first time I thought of my relationship with Christ as a divine embrace that resembled a dance was at a thrift store.

3

I sometimes browse the book section of the Goodwill store in downtown Colorado Springs, hoping for an occasional treasure but settling most often for simply a good deal. Before I leave, I always check the shelf that holds the fifty-cent cassettes in hopes of finding good company for my thirty-minute trip home.

One day I might take home the Pointer Sisters.

Another day Pavarotti.

This day it was a collection of classical music that made the ride.

The first selection on the tape was the “Emperor Waltz” by Johann Strauss II. It began with a simple musical phrase that seemed easy enough to dance to. In my mind’s eye, my feet followed the notes effortlessly.

Then the music swelled into a theme so noble I felt my back arching and my shoulders squaring in response. Something about that moment touched me,

and my eyes glistened with the beginning of tears. I felt in the presence of royalty . . . and ennobled by that presence. At that moment, I became committed to the dance, committed to following the music wherever it would lead.

When the easy, light-footed rhythms returned, I felt lifted by them. Quite unexpectedly, though, the music took a confusing turn. It seemed unsure of itself, as if it had lost its way on the page. I didn't like it. I didn't like the dissonance. Or the stumbling sense of uncertainty it brought to the dance.

Before I could break the embrace, however, the waltz returned to its familiar themes. I found myself once again being swept away by the music. It was exhilarating.

Toward the end of the waltz, the music slowed, so much so that it felt as if it were going to stop completely. Just before it did, a flute came in, and one protracted note from that flute ushered me to a crescendo so stirring it brought tears once again to my eyes.

I played the waltz again—and again tears brimmed my eyes—both at the beginning, where the noble strain of music swells, and at the end, where the music crests.

4

I wondered why. There were no lyrics, no words to stir my imagination. There was only the music.

As I pondered my reactions to the “Emperor Waltz,” the story of Jesus and his disciples came to mind. I reflected on the beginning notes of the waltz, and it seemed to capture how the disciples must have felt when Christ first invited them to follow him and

become fishers of men. How easy those initial steps must have been. Walking with Jesus from town to town, leisurely asking him questions along the way. Witnessing the miracle he performed at the wedding in Cana, tapping their toes to the festive music. Watching him interact with people, loving them, teaching them, consoling them.

Then I thought about the next section in the dance, where the music swells. I thought of my response to it, and it seemed similar to how the disciples must have reacted when they first realized who Jesus was. It happens to all of us at one time or another in our relationship with Christ. Some miraculous moment opens our eyes, the way it did with the disciples, and we ask ourselves, as they asked themselves, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” (Mark 4:41, NIV).

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At that moment, we realize for the first time the extraordinary dignity that has been conferred on us, that the Emperor himself has called our name, extended his hand, and invited us not only to be with him but to partner with him in the work he is doing in the world.

The dissonant part of the dance confused me. If I'd had the choice, I would have edited it out. But it was not my dance and therefore not my prerogative. My life has gone through three such movements—confusing times, each of which I would have edited out, too, if I'd had the choice. I'm sure the disciples would have wanted to do the same with some of the disorienting places to which they were led.

I reflected on the end of the waltz, where the music slows and it seems as if life itself is slowing. *Maybe this*

is how it all ends, I thought. One by one the notes of life drop off, dwindle to stillness, then silence. Instead of silence, however, a hopeful note sounds. It is the note that ushers us into the ballroom of heaven. It is a moment so stunningly resplendent that it takes my breath away.

It may be hard to imagine . . . but try.

Imagine yourself in a ballroom. Imagine that the Emperor, the Lord Jesus himself, has tapped your shoulder. Hear his voice as he speaks your name and asks you to dance. It is not a dance you have done before. You're uncertain about it, maybe a little fearful—hesitant to participate. But take a chance; step out onto the dance floor. As the Emperor draws you near, look into his eyes. Place your palm in his. And follow his lead.

Listen to the “Emperor Waltz” and allow yourself to be swept away.

When the waltz is over, pause to catch your breath; then relive the experience.

What were you feeling during the dance? Excited that you were on the dance floor? Honored that Jesus picked you to be his partner? Ennobled by the dignity of the dance? Confused at places? Uncertain of your next step? Out of breath at the pace? A little dizzy? Afraid you might trip and fall? Embarrassed that you stepped on his toes? Exhilarated when it was over?

All of those feelings you will experience in the course of following Christ. It's natural to feel uncertain about a dance you have never done before. It's natural to be fearful, even hesitant.

Dance lessons would help, wouldn't they?

But maybe it's not so much lessons in dancing we need as lessons in loving, because the Christian life is about intimacy, not technique. The Lord of the dance doesn't want us worrying about our feet. He doesn't want us wondering about the steps ahead. He merely wants us to feel the music, fall into his arms, and follow his lead.

There are places he wants to take us on the dance floor, things he wants to show us, feelings he wants to share with us, words he wants to whisper in our ear. This is what the divine embrace is—an invitation to a more intimate relationship with Christ, one exhilarating, ennobling, uncertain step at a time.

7

We have a choice, you and I. And it's a choice we make every day, throughout the day. The choice is this:

We can dance.

Or we can sit it out.

If we dance, we may step on his toes. And he may step on ours. We may stumble and bump into other people. We may fall on our faces and make fools of ourselves. People may talk, they may avoid us, they may even ridicule us.

If you fear those things, you may want to sit it out.

If you do, you won't have to worry. You'll be safe in your seat along the wall.

You'll also miss the dance.

More importantly, you'll miss the romance.

At some time or another, I have chosen to sit it out. Fear was a big reason. Fear of the attention it would

bring—and perhaps the criticism. Fear of embarrassment and possible estrangement. Fear of not being in control of my life, my career, my future. Fear of being led to places that would be uncomfortable, even painful.

There are two things I have learned from the divine embrace.

Perfect love really does cast out fear.

And I would rather dance poorly with Jesus than sit perfectly with anyone else.