

“Joy: Be Full of It”

May 20, 2018

Through the Eyes of a Child series – Pentecost Sunday

One of my best friends, Karie, lives in Namibia in Africa. Karie’s daughter, Adelyn, is three years old. Though there are some differences between life on two different continents, one thing that’s the same is how kids act and interact. Earlier this year, Karie sent a video of Adelyn running up to a big puddle (think a really big hole after a heavy rain!) and jumping in yelling “Arschbombe,” which is German for “Cannonball!” It was a perfect combination of pure joy and playfulness.

In Genesis 1, God created, and then we’re told...**SHOW SLIDE:** *And God saw that everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.* God delights in the creative process and calls it good. Now maybe that doesn’t sound like “play” to you, but there’s something powerful about playfulness, the ability to create and be creative, and the reminder that we need not take ourselves so seriously.

Psalms 100 calls us to express joy – to let it out – to be bold and certain, even to be loud about it! Some even translate a phrase in this psalm as “make a racket!” Psalm 100 calls us to worship God – to offer ourselves to God in praise and thanksgiving - and to remember the joy of being God’s people and being known and loved by God.

If you ask anyone where they find joy these days, the answer may not come so quickly. Sometimes we think joy means happiness, but if we’re looking at Scripture’s definition, joy is a deeper sense of our connection to God our Creator. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit and a product of God’s grace at work in us. So how do we reclaim it, and how can joy truly give us strength for each new day?

First, we have to remember that doing what brings us joy is important. As I talk to other pastors, this idea of the need for play has become more and more vital to a healthy life in ministry. In my work with our Board of Ordained Ministry, one of the questions we invite candidates to talk about how they find time for play and creativity, where they find joy.

Somehow we’ve equated the two - playfulness and joy. Maybe it’s because it’s easy to do. And maybe it’s because they really are connected. You saw it in the video - that connection between fun and play and true enjoyment! There’s even a growing movement that says play really is a spiritual practice.

So first, what does it mean to play? Children play as a way of learning and growing. Play requires creativity and sometimes teamwork. Play leaves room for spontaneity. Rev. Don Garrett says, “When we play, we’re not full of ourselves, we’re not looking for meaning, and there’s no winning or losing, we’re just enjoying play for its own sake.” Robert Gottfried connects play to developing trust in God - the source of creativity.

Margaret Guenther, an Episcopal priest says, "Play exists for its own sake. Play is for the moment; it is not hurried, even when the pace is fast and timing seems important. When we play, we also celebrate **holy uselessness**. Like the calf frolicking in the meadow, we need no pretense or excuses. **Work is productive; play, in its disinterestedness and self-forgetting, can be fruitful.**" That's important to hear - play is fruitful!

Bernard L. De Koven says, "Playfulness is a practice that shapes our souls. It connects us. It is an act of belief in ourselves, the vehicle whose wheels are powered by our faith in life, bringing us to places of wonder, moments of joy."

Garrett lifts up the positive power of play: "Experts on the social effects of play say that people who engage in purely enjoyable and purposeless activities tend to be less violent, more empathetic and trusting, and more adaptable to life's challenges."

But it's a difficult sell, sometimes, isn't it? How many of us feel like we have time to play? The better question is: how many of us make time to play? Those with small children at home or in their lives may find it a given. Sitting on the floor with blocks, throwing a ball, drawing, playing a board game, playing in the sand - all of it is time well-spent, but it's hard to remember that it's time well-spent - and that we're called to spend time that way. And yet, looking through the eyes of a child, we're reminded that play is a part of who we are and how we're called to engage the world in order to enjoy God's good creation.

Hear these words from Zechariah 8:4-5 - **SHOW SLIDE:**

This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each of them with cane in hand because of their age. The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there." This is picture of the restoration of Jerusalem. It's a vision of the old and the young living life as normal, and a part of that normal is children playing.

This passage in Ecclesiastes may conjure up a memory, depending on your age. Maybe it reminds you of a song from 1965 by the Byrds called "Turn, Turn, Turn" or perhaps to a 1984 movie called "Footloose" where a rebellious teen named Wren fights to have a dance in a town where dancing isn't allowed. He quotes this passage from Ecclesiastes as proof for God's advocacy for dancing.

Whatever your memory, Ecclesiastes is a part of Wisdom literature in the Bible - like Proverbs. If you read all 12 chapters, you'll find the struggle of the writer to make meaning out of this earthly life. Wealth and material goods are fleeting, and yet that's where people focus. Human connections aren't always easy to find or trust. There's a need for a community over and above the push for success and power. And there's a basic need to find joy in what we do and who we are. It seems that times haven't changed much - even from a few hundred years before Jesus' birth!

This third chapter is popular because it explains quite simply what we already know - there's a time for everything and then goes through the list: laughing and crying,

grieving and dancing, speaking and listening, living and dying, and so on. If we look at our lives, it speaks truth. We've experienced it; we get it!

So graduates, as you look at the future, I know that I speak for all of us when I say that these words are true. You've probably already experienced much of what it says here - the ups and downs that life brings - but there are more to come. And the best wisdom I have is to know and trust that God walks with you and desires that you experience true joy.

The writer of Ecclesiastes advocates for finding joy and enjoying life as a relief for anxious times and everyday frustrations that we feel. This ancient writer is asking the same questions we ask: *Why am I here? What is the meaning of all this? Does what I do matter to God or anyone else?*

The writer also says that God has planted eternity in our hearts, but we don't know the future. We can't see the whole picture that God sees and knows. So, I've decided, the writer says, there's nothing better than to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we can. Seize the day! Live life to the fullest! He's advocating for this same sense of play as a spiritual practice - a reminder that we don't have to be productive every minute, but that taking time to be creative can be fruitful. There's even a directive to "eat, drink, and be merry!"

But before we get too excited and go away from here saying that the preacher said you can simply live it up, we need to hear the last part. The writer says that enjoyment is a gift of God. Joy is a product of grace. Joy comes from receiving grace. Joy is a gift that we cannot earn or deserve. It's not a goal we pursue, but a gift that we receive from God. One person says that joy is "grace recognized." And if we consider joy as a part of child-like faith, then it makes sense. We see God's grace in a child's joy and playfulness.

God really does desire that we find joy because we're grounded in God's grace as we live each day. We are created by God who loves us and calls us to love each other. In case you missed Bishop Curry's excellent sermon at the Royal Wedding yesterday, love has power that can change the world, and there's joy in that. We're a part of God's redemption story right here and now, and there's joy in claiming that, too!

Enjoyment is a gift of God. Graduates, you're going to receive many gifts from people who love you. They'll give you gifts because they love you. There's no strings attached when it's truly a gift, but when we receive a gift, usually we say *thank you*. Usually we have a sense of honoring the giver.

So I wonder what that looks like for us. How does our joy in life - our joy about life - honor God who is the Giver of life? Hear Jesus' words again: *Let the children come...with joy playing and laughing!* I can only imagine the children who came to Jesus - and how they came - maybe apprehensive or maybe excited, but all of them welcome!

Be child-like and find time - make time - to play and create. When we do, we grow in knowing how deep and wide is God's grace. We understand better how incredible it

is that the One who created us and everything we see calls us to keep on creating, dreaming, and finding joy. Go and be full of joy!

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

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