

Romans 12:1-3, 9-17 (CEB)
 Matthew 18:1-5, 19:13-15 (CEB)

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Romans 12:1-3, 9-17

Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship.^[a] ² Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.³ For by the grace given to me, I tell everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he should think. Instead, think sensibly, as God has distributed a measure of faith to each one.

⁹ Let love be without hypocrisy. Detest evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Love one another deeply as brothers and sisters. Take the lead in honoring one another. ¹¹ Do not lack diligence in zeal; be fervent in the Spirit;^[a] serve the Lord.¹² Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; be persistent in prayer. ¹³ Share with the saints in their needs; pursue hospitality. ¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud; instead, associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own estimation. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Give careful thought to do what is honorable in everyone's eyes. ¹⁸ If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Matthew 18:1-5, 19:13-15

At that time^[a] the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "So who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" ² He called a small child and had him stand among them. ³ "Truly I tell you," he said, "unless you turn and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."⁴ Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child—this one is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ And whoever welcomes^[a] one child like this in my name welcomes me.

19:13-15

¹³ Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray, but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ Jesus said, "Leave the little children alone, and don't try to keep them from coming to me, because the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."^[a] ¹⁵ After placing his hands on them, he went on from there.

A Playful God

College freshmen will soon be heading off to college and one of the steps of college entry will be orientation. Well, this past week has been "Orientation Week" for Don and I as we step into our new responsibilities as Parish Associates assigned to pastoral care, and our question has been, "Where do we start?" "How do we get acquainted with the people and the programs here at Covenant?" Monday morning came along and so I showed up and started with Vacation Bible School—I attended the

opening exercises for the kids and staff as they sang songs and learned about staying strong in Jesus through truth, justice, peace, faith, and salvation. These are hard topics—hard topics for adults, let alone our youngest disciples. But they have something to teach us—because they had a fun week, they played hard this week making friends and singing songs, and hearing stories and along the way they absorbed important lessons about truth and justice, peace and faith and salvation.

I think Vacation Bible School must be one of God’s favorite times of the year because it is so full of joy and energy and love. And I’d like to propose this morning that we who are made in the image of our Creator are made to play and children are so good at it. A year ago, our kids and grandkids and great-grandkids were visiting from Missouri. It was a crazy house full of activity. The youngest was a little over a year old at the time and she was just learning to walk and just starting to pick up speed. It was so much fun to watch her during her family’s visit. One of her favorite things was to step from our kitchen through the open sliding glass doorway onto the porch. There’s no real step there, just the threshold to step over but she found that fun. As soon as she would get out to the porch, she would turn around the other way and walk back into the kitchen. She repeated this pattern again and again during her stay with us, usually depending on the help of an adult to hold her hand and help her keep her balance to take what for her was a very “big” step. It was such fun—she was having fun and we were all having fun with her!

No one has to teach children to play. They are born with this natural ability to enjoy what they are doing, to just become absorbed in curiosity and wonder, discovery and imitation. They are, after all, made in the image of God—and so are we. We all have this innate capacity for play, a gift from God, but in the demands of daily living we may lose track of it. James Weldon Johnson has written a wonderful poem entitled, “Creation,” that depicts our playful God in whose image we are made. Listen to some excerpts from his poem,

God smiled,
And the light broke,
And the darkness rolled up on one side,

And the light stood shining on the other,
And God said: That's good!
Then God reached out and took the light in his hands,
And God rolled the light around in his hands
Until he made the sun;
And he set that sun a-blazing in the heavens.
And the light that was left from making the sun
God gathered it up in a shining ball
And flung it against the darkness,
Spangling the night with the moon and stars.
Then down between
The darkness and the light
He hurled the world;
And God said: That's good!
 Then the green grass sprouted,
 And the little red flowers blossomed,
 The pine tree pointed his finger to the sky,
 And the oak spread out his arms,
 The lakes cuddled down in the hollows of the ground,
 And the rivers ran down to the sea;
 And God smiled again,
 And the rainbow appeared,
 And curled itself around his shoulder.
Then God raised his arm and he waved his hand
Over the sea and over the land,
And he said: Bring forth! Bring forth!
And quicker than God could drop his hand,
Fishes and fowls
And beasts and birds
Swam the rivers and the seas,
Roamed the forests and the woods,
And split the air with their wings.
And God said: That's good!

Up from the bed of the river
 God scooped the clay;
 And by the bank of the river
 He kneeled him down;
 And there the great God Almighty
 This great God, Like a mammy bending over her baby,
 Kneeled down in the dust
 Toiling over a lump of clay
 Till he shaped it in his own image;

Here is God playing the world into being, throwing the stars into the sky, and scooping up handfuls of clay and molding it into humanity, man and woman. And God does it again and again, as the sun comes up every morning creating a new day and the moon rises every evening bringing with it another night. And each new flower and each new baby and God smiles and calls it all good. Again and again. Jesus says to us in Matthew, become like children.

This is so counter to the messages that tell us to grow up, take responsibility, work hard, get things done. I know in my house growing up that we were expected to get our work done before there was time for play. I still appreciate that work ethic that my parents instilled in me, but somehow along this path to adulthood we can lose touch with the art of playing. Maybe it's because as adults we know that the work is never really done. We assume that anything is possible if we work hard enough. Meaning then, that if something is not yet accomplished it's because we need to work harder. The treadmill is unrelenting. So, we don't slow for curiosity and experimentation and the repetition of doing those things we enjoy over and over again. We're too busy solving problems, getting important things accomplished, crossing things off our lists.

The trouble is that the very things we want to do become—truth, and justice, and peace, and faith and salvation—are so much harder when we're drained of creativity and imagination and play. When life gets hard, really hard, when there are pandemics, and building issues, and sickness and death, and conflict and division and misunderstanding---what we need isn't to work harder and faster and better. What we need is play, the ability

to imagine another way of being and doing, another way of seeing our world, and another way of seeing ourselves and each other.

Debie Thomas, an Episcopal priest, wrote in the *Christian Century* about a powerful scene in C. S. Lewis', *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. She said: "Aslan [the lion who symbolizes God and all goodness] has just come back to life after being killed by the wicked White Witch. Although the majestic lion's resurrection foreshadows the novel's happy ending, the land of Narnia is in immediate peril. War is ravaging the land, Aslan's faithful followers are dying, and the White Witch is gleefully certain that she has triumphed over her enemy. It is a dire moment.

"And at this dire moment, Aslan takes a break from the solemn business of world-saving to play a rousing game of tag. "Oh children," he shouts to the kids who have witnessed his resurrection, "I feel my strength coming back to me. Oh children, catch me if you can!" And off he goes, leading them on an exhilarating, joy-filled chase through the hills until they finally collapse "in a happy laughing heap of fur and arms and legs." "It was such a romp," Lewis writes, "as no one had ever had / except in Narnia."

A moment of life-threatening crisis and there is a game of tag.

And our scripture says, "At that time^[a] the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "So who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" [Here they are competing with one another, wanting to be the best.] ² Jesus called a small child and had him stand among them. ³ "Truly I tell you," Jesus said, "unless you turn and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. And just like Aslan in C.S. Lewis's book, Jesus takes time out of his life-saving work to talk to disciples about being child-like.

This is Jesus' invitation to play. This is Jesus' invitation to set down our roles and authority and to become like a child—let go of taking ourselves so seriously (or as Paul says, to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to.)

So, if we seek to add playfulness to our spiritual lives, what does that look like? Thomas wrote: "I think it looks like deep attentiveness: a

willingness to gaze/wonder, attend to detail, and enjoy rather than to use, abuse, or consume. It looks like collaboration and fairness, a mutual commitment to the pleasure of all involved in the game. (“A Playful Romp with God,” Debie Thomas, February 7, 2017.)” I think it looks like being present, and following Paul’s charge to “rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.”

The Westminster Catechism asks, "What is the chief end of humanity?" and then gives us the answer, "To praise God and enjoy God forever." That sounds to me, like our work--our purpose in life--is to enjoy, to play. I think this is what artists do, they play around until they've created something new. Poets play with words, musicians take the same old notes and recreate them into a new song and they play music. I was told growing up not to play with my food, but watch someone who is a chef or a gourmet cook and they've never outgrown the fun of playing with food.

I love the verses in Proverbs (8:30-31) where the writer speaks of being present with God this way, “ then I was beside him, like a master worker;^[a]and I was daily his^[b] delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.”

Over the last two and a half years this pandemic has taught us all that we can’t take for granted the privileges of being together with our family and friends, of gathering for worship, of singing together, and of seeing each other’s faces. As COVID numbers go down and as restrictions are lifted and as we can gather again for worship and VBS, maybe the most important thing we can do is to enjoy God and one another, to play and laugh and sing and to delight in God as God delights in us. May this be so for you and for me. Amen.

Resources:

“A Playful Romp with God,” by Debi Thomas, February 7, 2019

The God Who Plays, Brian Edgars

“A Time to Play, Curtis Almquist, August 2, 2016

“Creation,” by James Weldon Johnson