



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

Sermons

Boys and Girls Dancing in the Street

Matthew 5:13-16, Zechariah 8:1-13

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Last week I was visiting my 29-year-old niece who is being treated for leukemia in North Carolina. I went because I simply needed to hug her, to be present in the midst of all the tests and chemo and waiting. My sister and I traveled together, and shared a bed, just like we did as children. Just after we had fallen asleep one evening, my phone rang, and I immediately panicked, knowing the hour was too late for simply a friendly call. It was my husband, letting me know that our 18-year-old daughter was stranded in South Haven with car problems, and he was on his way to get her. Being far away and unable to help, I immediately began to pray for safety and comfort, and asked my sister to do the same. Unable to sleep, restless and trying to keep worry at bay, we stumbled into playing the game we'd invented as children. The game goes like this: the first player makes up the titles of two songs, on the fly, and offers them to the second player to choose between. The second player chooses the title that sounds most interesting to them, and the first player makes up a song to fit the title on the spot. Then, they switch places, and the second player has to make up the titles and song. We began to play this game, quickly dissolving into belly laughs so intense that my abdominal muscles hurt the next morning. We did not play for a score or any sort of judgement, but just to entertain one another in a moment that felt scary and helpless, just as we had as little kids sharing a big bed. The world is not as safe as we want it to be, and things beyond our control happen all the time, and sometimes all we can do is laugh and be silly together in the face of it.

Sometimes, it is imagining better, carefree days ahead that allows us to get through whatever trials we face.

I'd guess this is what the Israelites might have felt when they read the words from the prophet Zechariah. Words that promised peace and joy and a sense of freedom from burden; a time in the future when the exile would be over, and people could get their lives back to normal. According to Bible scholars, Zechariah spoke words of hope for the temple to be rebuilt, to a community that had been purified through the process of exile, and the coming of the messianic age. The images contained in the prophet's book, at least chapters 1-8, follow a specific pattern, a series of "night visions", each of which is following by a question and an answer. As the reader, we see that Zechariah is trying to make sense of the chaos and trauma he finds and trying to understand where the people of Israel are in all of it, and indeed, where God is. Zechariah is considered a lesser prophet compared to those like Isaiah and Jeremiah, and we rarely hear texts read from this book during worship, apart from the portion of chapter 9 that has traditionally been understood as a prophecy for Jesus, "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" at Christmas time. But the book of Zechariah is far more than just those few verses. In chapter one, God is understood to contain both anger and tender words of mercy, a combination that we can easily dismiss, but a combination that seems unbelievably real to me. Surely, God sees the cruelty we do to one another, and knows the depth of our disobedience to divine will. And yet, God loves us and envisions a better world for us. We see both of these truths in the book of Zechariah.

The vision of old people sitting in the streets, and children playing there is an image that is so specific and so easy to grasp, an idea of what the redeemed world

could look like if we humans would do our part. Inherent in this vision is a lack of conflict and a beautiful expression of community, with all generations present in different but harmonious ways. It's not hard to go from the words of this prophecy that is thousands of years old and imagine summertime in my childhood neighborhood, with kids playing games like hide and go seek, ghosts in the graveyard and capture the flag together until the street lights went on, all while adults sat and visited on front porches with glasses of iced tea or listened to Ernie Harwell's warm and familiar voice calling the Tigers game. I realize this rendering of memory could sound so idyllic it's false, but I really think many a summer evening was spent that way on the Campbell Street of my youth. Daytimes were lazier, but similar, with pick-up games of baseball, imaginary play in the backyard, and the highly anticipated sound of the ice cream truck. This leads me to consider the enormous change we experience going from child to adult. Sure, with adulthood comes the freedom to eat chocolate for breakfast or read past our bedtime, but doesn't it come with a lot of extra responsibilities, too? You may have seen the quote on posters and signs: "Don't grow up. It's a trap!" Adulthood means things like paying bills, scheduling appointments, budgeting finances, making dinner, and washing sheets. Not the stuff of fantasy to be sure. But, could it be that our adult lives just need some inspiration? Both from children and the way they operate in their daily lives, and from Zechariah's vision of what a whole and happy community looks like? The vision for the post-exilic community did not just mean faithful living, but according to Zechariah, it meant joyful living, free from the violence of war. The streets were no longer a place of conflict and danger but had become a place of welcome and play. What does this mean for us today, when for so many, the streets pose more concern than celebration, where an imagined great society for young and old alike has fallen

short, as rising health costs mean that the leading cause for families to live on the streets is foreclosure due to medical debt, gun violence in homes and schools is a daily news story, and neighborhoods look confusing and different to folks who have lived there for 60 years? Humanity has always known worry and struggle as times have changed; this is nothing new. But it might be that the epidemic of “busyness” is worse than ever before. The double-edged sword of technology means that we can be available for work tasks every hour of every day, except when we sleep. There are so many kid activities for families to choose from that we might find it hard to fit in dinner together. Our individual plates may be so overly full between work, caring for a loved one, and housework, that free time may be non-existent. And this is really bad news, because having fun with absolutely no goal in mind might be one of the most central needs for our mental and spiritual health, no matter our income or family structure.

Central to Christian faith in the Reformed tradition, we believe that we have been saved by Grace alone. But, the ways that we allow fear to govern us sometimes, you’d never know. Instead of meeting this glorious world with unbridled awe and wonder, we very often face it feeling as though we aren’t good enough for it; that we haven’t done enough or achieved enough or accumulated enough. The tragedy of this is that our beautiful world, filled to the brim with joys and delights is like a love poem handed from God to us, and we may be so busy stewing in feelings of inadequacy, or disconnected entirely, that we have failed to notice. This sacred earth is a gift not only to be honored and preserved, but it’s also a place in which to find joy and laughter. Together. And maybe that’s the catch. We so often consider the world and the wonder we create here to be territory to conquer, instead of the enormous privilege of finding creative ways to share it, tend it, and play in it together.

We are pretty comfortable with the goodness of children at play, but there is a tremendous amount of research that suggests that play is important for adults too. Clinical psychologist and chief of the Division of Psychology at Ellis Hospital, [Dr. Rudy Nydegger](#), says there are two basic tenets of play. “First, it is something that we do for recreation that is purely for enjoyment and/or entertainment — it is something we do just for fun. Second, it is something that is [intrinsically motivating](#). In other words, it is something that we want to do and is not something we need to be coerced or 'bribed' into doing. It is voluntary; we do it just because we want to.” This definition sounds an awful lot like what a spiritual practice should be. Spiritual practices are done as a response to God’s Grace, not as an obligation or out of guilt. Spiritual practices are expressions of joy and devotion, and for the purpose of that alone, with no goal, deadline or finished product in mind. Brain research shows clearly that spiritual practices such as prayer lower blood pressure, lessen anxiety, and build creativity, and play has been demonstrated to do the same thing.

I can’t imagine that God created us for drudgery, and it seems like the waste of an exquisite gift to approach our lives in a humorless ring of work-eat-sleep, repeat. As we consider how to respond to God with love and gratitude for the gracious gifts we know, it might help us to remember Zechariah’s image of the children playing in the streets, and the old people sitting there with them. Our playfulness, whether a morning run or bike ride, playing fetch or snuggling with your dog, a drive for ice cream with the convertible top down, singing along with gusto to the car radio, doodling in a notebook, accepting pretend cookies from a child at a tea party, or splashing around in Lake Michigan, demonstrates thanksgiving, an offering of praise to the One who formed us and loves us. These offerings are celebrations of being uniquely human. As Professor of

Developmental Psychology at New York University, Catherine Tamis-Lemonda has written, “That’s what’s really cool about children, they don’t worry about the future, they don’t check things off their [to-do lists](#). They live in the moment. There doesn’t have to be a final goal and they play for the sake of play. The truth is, play is being joyfully immersed in the moment, and as adults, we rarely do that.” I can’t think of any way to better praise our God and follow our greatest teacher than to be joyfully immersed in the moment. Whether he was turning water into wine, talking with the woman who touched the hem of his garment, or sitting in the upper room explaining what was to come with his disciples, isn’t “joyfully immersed in the moment” Jesus in a nutshell? His attention was where his feet were planted, and he was intentional about sharing time and space with people, whether they were disciples, a woman with a hemorrhage, religious leaders, or tax collectors. He encouraged us to become like little children, geniuses of playfulness.

And if our Protestant work ethic begins to take over, and we just can’t find the time for fun, let’s remind one another that play actually makes adults more creative and productive in the long run. Whether it’s home tasks, work projects, or commitments to social justice and alleviating human suffering, we can do better with greater resiliency when we know how to take a break for fun. As John Muir said, “Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, place to play in and pray in...” Everybody means adults, too.

The feast we see before us today is not one of monotony or drudgery. It’s not a ritual of going through the motions, but a beautifully prepared banquet that both celebrates this moment and gives us a foretaste of the kingdom. While there can be a solemn component to it, let us not forget that this is also a prime opportunity

to be fully immersed in the moment. Sharing this table is not just another job for us to do, but a sacrament for us to joyfully share.

We think a lot about what we need to teach children, but today, let us be reminded of what we can learn from them, finding joy and pleasure in playful pursuits for absolutely no purpose at all. So, belly laugh whenever you can; try a new recipe or a different genre of literature with no fear of failure; create something just because you can; watch the women's world cup soccer match today and see why some call it the "beautiful game"; skip, jump, hopscotch, or dance along to your favorite song, whatever your ability; chat with people you love about the utter silliness of life; sit on your porch or hold the hand of a child and admire all of the fireflies in the hush of evening, and do it all as joyful people of gratitude who are leaving the blandness of life behind and reclaiming their salty flavor, letting their light shine brighter than any 4th of July fireworks display. Hide that kind of light under a bushel? NO! Amen.