

Like a Child

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Texts: Proverbs 8:21-33, Matthew 18:1-5

One weekend, early in her kindergarten year, Karen carefully dragged all of her toys into the living room and set up very distinct “centers,” which she labeled with pictures and strings of letters, and, after making her older sister sit on the carpet and sing a song with her, she invited her to choose a center to play in – the table toys or the science station or the writing desk or the architect’s corner or the fancy bakery center. I could hear her teacher as she played at being the teacher.

Children delight in learning. In their play, they explore their world. They are expert physicists as they slide from side to side in the tub, finding the perfect frequency to create a wave of water that goes crashing over the edge of the tub. They are mathematicians as they manipulate beads and blocks and artists as they recreate their world with crayons and playdough. And there’s nothing like the gasp of wonder when they find cylinders and spheres on their lunch tray – I call them tater tots and peas – but they are playfully making sense of their world.

Fred Rogers is credited with saying “play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning...In fact, play is really the work of childhood.”¹ And much of the children play is playing at being adults. They bandage up the imaginary wounds on their stuffed animals with the confidence of doctors. They pretend to cook, making feasts out of wood and paper that would make Gordon Ramsey jealous. They are teachers, firefighters, police officers, pastors. They play at taking care of children and keeping house. While I have never once considered vacuuming a playful way to spend an afternoon, I’ve seen the eyes of a child light up when you hand them a toy vacuum and they giggle with delight as it buzzes as they “vacuum” the floor, And being the table washer is the best job in the classroom because you get to spray the cleaning water bottle! Through play, children learn the skills they need to be adults. It’s what helps them meet their goals and find their purpose and calling in this world.

I spent a lot of time with children. As a teacher and a pastor that works in children’s and youth ministry, I see kids at work through play all the time. And because I work with them, I get to engage in it too. A child once asked John why my office has so many toys and he said it was because it was enticing to the children. But it’s more than that – all of those toys are ways to engage a playful God in this world. Each of those things is a lesson, a reminder, an invitation into the spiritual practice to play.

And it’s just as enticing to the adults...because we were made to play. When was the last time you played? It seems, as we grow up, we are expected to put aside playful things and be serious. It’s time for adulting, right? Work replaces play. But what if...

¹ Fred Rogers, *You Are Special: Words of Wisdom for All Ages from a Beloved Neighbor* (New York: Penguin, 1995), ch. 4, Kindle.

What if play is not only the work of childhood? What if play is still serious learning for adults?

When the disciples ask Jesus what they need to do to be the greatest, he plucks a child from the crowd and places them in the center. Here he is again, turning everything upside down. These men, concerned with being the most successful, the most respected, the most grown-up, are told they cannot enter the kingdom unless they enter like a child.

It makes me wonder...if children play at being an adult in order to prepare for their place in this world...perhaps adults should be playing at being a child in order to prepare for their place in the kingdom of God. But what does it mean to play at being a child?

One of the best things about being a teacher of children is getting caught up in the wonder they have in the world. They don't worry about things that are not easily explained. But they are also astounded when they finally know how something works. They believe in miracles. They marvel at creation. But they hold science and math right up next to miracles and unexplainable things and delight in it all.

In Proverbs, Wisdom is described as having been with God as God created the world as an artisan. This uncommon word is hard to translate and the NRSV offers an alternate translation..."a little child."² Either way, it speaks of one who is being trained by an expert and is delighting in the miracle of creation. Wisdom plays with God, with the world, and with humanity. To play like a little child beside God is to lean into wonder, to see the things that don't make sense, and know you don't have to explain it...sometimes you can just delight in those moments knowing that there are no human words that can capture the wonder of God, but it doesn't make it any less real.

One of the most humbling things about being a teacher is the way that a child can be so confident that they know the answer. Young children are not afraid to tell you that you are wrong...even when you are very very right. But when you listen to them and take them seriously, you will find a partner in education. They are willing to have their minds changed, but they want to be co-creators in it. You're going to have to show them and do it from a place of respect. In this, children model the importance of relationships. They model the importance of listening and meeting a person where they are. They model the humility needed to make sense of things just being explored. When we agree to meet each other where we are and approach a topic from a place of co-creation, we may just learn to see the world differently than ever before. Perhaps if we learned to listen with humility, to be willing to engage in hard, but respectful conversations, to have our minds changed through relationships with others that open our worldview...perhaps if we did this, we could end the polarizations that divide us and start to unlock the kingdom of God.

Children are obsessed with fairness. I can't count the number of times as a teacher and parent that I've heard a child shout, "that's not fair," to which my answer is, so often, "life's not fair." They see injustice everywhere and they're not always wrong in naming it that. Children intrinsically want to help. Children are flabbergasted as to why we would segregate humanity because of the color of their skin or who they love or what gender they are. They are appalled that we would let anyone be hurt or go hungry. This is taught. We teach them early that that's just

² BDB, s.v. "יִלְדָּה."

how it is. They're little and we're big, so we matter more, because strength is power. We show them a world where people work so hard and can't get ahead because someone else started with more and that means they have more power. And in our worst moments, we say God ordained them to suffer. But what if we didn't? What if we played like children and tried to make it fair – to give all people a strong foundation without worrying that we might all end up playing together? What if we pointed out injustice wherever we saw it and demanded something better for all our neighbors?

And then, there is the imagination of childhood. Their creativity is impressive. I think this is because they don't start with limitations in mind, but rather with what could and should be done. They dream with abandon. Yes, some of the ideas are unrealistic. Resources ARE an issue. We DO have to work within the laws of nature. But children start with possibilities instead of limitations.

I once had my youth group approach me at a conference. They had decided that the church needed a cat. It would take care of the mouse problem at the church and also, cats are cuddly and lower people's blood pressure. I explained that we couldn't have a cat because people are allergic. They came to the next meal with list of hypoallergenic cats. I said we could not have a hairless cat, but they had quite hair-full cats on their list. I asked who would take care of the cat. They came to breakfast with a plan for automatic cat feeders and litterboxes. I reminded them that cats live a long time. At lunch, they'd chosen the child who would attend seminary so they could be the next pastor and care for the cat. All I can say is good luck when those kids are old enough to serve on session.

But imagine what they could do if you let them loose to solve the problem of gun violence in their schools. They imagine solutions that adults would never even let themselves imagine because we get stuck in the minutia. In doing so, we stifle our childlike creativity. We never even get to think about how it might actually be done. Imagine if the boy on the shoreline had never offered his small lunch of loaves and fishes to Jesus because it was too impractical...a drop in the bucket to feed 5000?³ Imagine if we had the faith of that child...that that lunch could do something and had faith in what God, and God's children in face of generosity, could do with it? What would it look like if we let ourselves dream of a world like Jesus promises and then look at what we can do, figuring out how it might be done, and taking the first small steps to make it so?

Friends, what if wisdom is being like the child who playfully delights in God's created world? What if our work, our Christian vocation, as children of God, is to play as children with an imagination run wild, with a passion for fairness, with a grace to be transformed in relationships, and an innate sense of wonder and joy in God?

Today is Rally Day. It's the day we come together to celebrate our children, our church family, our relationships in this community, and to come with renewed fervor for another year of formation in faith together. My challenge for you this year is to play. Play at being a child. Find a child to mentor you and delight in their wisdom and playfulness as they delight in yours. If we keep at it, we might just find the kingdom of God bursting open around us everywhere. And that's good news! Amen.

³ Matt. 14:13-21