

“Jesus in Our Play”
Sermon Series on *Everyday Jesus* #5
Dr. Peter B. Barnes
First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC
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(Mk. 10:13-16)

Introduction.

Later this week my family will travel to North Carolina, and we’ll make our way to the coast and enjoy a week at the beach. Woohoo! I can’t wait. It will be so good to have everyone together. This annual trip to the Carolina coast has become *the* favorite thing my family likes to do together.

Why is going to the beach such a wonderful experience for just about everyone? I suspect it’s partly because at the beach you get to take a break from the grind of work and school. It’s also a time to rest, soak up the sun, eat fresh seafood, and take the time just to talk and relax. But there’s another reason why I think vacations at the beach are so delightful for most people, and it’s because at the beach we play.

If this year is like any of the others at the beach, my family and I will kick the soccer ball, we’ll throw the Frisbee, and we’ll play some board games. We’ll build sand castles, play in puddles, and jump in the ocean. And, best of all, we’ll have a dance party! My four-year-old grandson Lleyton is the prime instigator of all the dance parties on our beach trips, and I suspect he’ll do it again this year.

At some point in the day Lleyton calls out to everyone in a loud voice, “Let’s have a dance party!” Then we put some rock music on the stereo, and the fun begins. I’d show you a video of last year’s dance party if it wasn’t so embarrassing. Out on the family dance floor all of us move and strut and prance in the silliest ways. We adults become like children, and it’s always a fun and lively time for everyone.

What does God think about play, and what role should it have in the Christian life? If Jesus wants to be a part of our everyday lives, does He also want to be involved in our play as well? Or is it too trivial a matter for Jesus to be concerned with? As I study the Bible, I have come to believe that God does indeed care about our play, and He very much wants to be a part of it. That’s the subject of my sermon this morning in our *Everyday Jesus* series. As we consider Jesus in our play, I want to mention four things briefly for your consideration. The first is we were made to play.

I. We Were Made to Play.

Play is a fundamental part of the human experience, and it isn't long after a child is born that they learn the joy of playing. Whether it's shaking a rattle, throwing a ball, or later playing make-believe as an imaginary superhero, play is at the heart of what it means to be a child. But play isn't just for children. Studies indicate that everyone, including adults, needs to play, and making time for it is essential to mental and emotional well-being. I would argue that it's also important for your spiritual well-being, too. More about that later.

There are many different forms in which play can be expressed. Did you know that the *Random House Dictionary* lists 53 different meanings for the word?! For example, it mentions "playing a sport, acting in a play, playing an instrument, playing house," and even "making a play for love," among others. These examples only scratch the surface of the various activities we would consider "play." However, play is also an attitude as well as an action, isn't it? You can be very serious in what you do, even in your play, but you can also be very playful, even in your work. Do you see the difference?

In one sense play is a very simple idea. It's easy for us to imagine a person, especially a child, playing, and we get what the word means. However, play is actually a more complex and multifaceted subject than you might think it is at first blush, and many academic books and articles have been written on the importance, value, and even theology of play. From a Christian point of view, play also gets to the heart of what it means to be a human being made in the image of God, and the fact of the matter is that when God made us He hard-wired us with a need to play.

II. A Biblical Theology of Play.

Most of the expressions of Christianity that I've been around over the years have a well-developed theology of work. Sometimes it's called the Protestant Work Ethic, and it could be summarized in the verse, "*Whatever you do in word or deed, do it heartily, as if unto the Lord.*" (Col. 3:23). You get the impression that a mature Christian is characterized by hard work. And I don't wish to detract from that today, because I think it is a biblical truth. It's what Scripture teaches. And Heather reminded us of this biblical truth in her sermon a few weeks ago on Jesus in our work.

However, I also think there is a counterpart to a theology of work, and it's a biblical theology of play. There are a number of references in Scripture, especially in the book of Psalms, which seem to indicate that not only is playfulness a part of God's nature, but it's also His intention for the various aspects of His creation to play as well. For example, Psalm 96 declares, "*Let the earth be glad, let the sea resound, and all that is in it; let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy*" (vs. 11-12). Psalm 104:26 talks about the sea creature leviathan which God "*formed to frolic in the oceans.*"

There is a playfulness to creation, and it's as if the psalmist is trying to paint a picture of the created order playing before the Lord. In contrast to this emphasis in Scripture, some expressions of the Christian faith seem to allow no place for play or for the joyous celebration of life. It reminds me of a book I saw a number of years ago which had the provocative title *When I Relax I Feel Guilty*. And some Christians act like they've been baptized in lemon juice!

Did you know that the Hebrew word for "play" is also the same word for "dance"? When the Bible tells the story of David the king of Israel leading the procession in a celebration of the Ark of the Covenant coming back to Jerusalem, the text says that "*he danced before the Lord with all his might...with shouts and the sound of loud trumpets*" (2 Sam. 6:14). And "*David was leaping and dancing before the Lord*" (6:16). Could it be that one of the main ways God used David in the life of the nation of Israel was to remind them of the importance of the joy of dancing and playing before the Lord? C.S. Lewis once said that the greatest thing that the Psalms did for him was express the joy that made David dance.

Author and pastor Eugene Peterson wrote a book entitled *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, and in the introduction of the book he quotes a poem by the priest Gerald Manley Hopkins which contains the title of Peterson's book. He goes on to say, "The central verb, 'play,' catches the exuberance and freedom that mark life when it is lived beyond necessity, beyond mere survival. 'Play' also suggests words and sounds and actions that are 'played' for another, intentional and meaningful renderings of beauty or truth or goodness. Hopkins incorporates this sense of play with God as the ultimate 'other' – which is to say that all life is, or can be, worship."¹

Peterson suggests here that play and worship actually go together. The Bible presents a robust theology of play, and I think that sometimes you and I are most fully human and we most fully reflect God's image when we play.

III. The Dangers of Play.

Well, if play is a biblical idea, are there any problems we should be careful to avoid in our play? The answer is yes. Any good thing created by God can be misused. And there are two potential problems I want to mention briefly this morning.

The first danger is if we allow play to keep us from fulfilling our obligations or attending to our relationships. Many people struggle with maintaining healthy priorities, and they can go overboard in their pursuit of their hobbies or their engagement in activities we would describe as play. Their work suffers, and their family gets the short end of the stick.

Addiction to play is a danger to avoid, just like any other addiction. Whether your play involves video games, running, listening to music, shopping at the mall,

or any number of activities in which you engage that provide a sense of relief from the demands and stress of life, you have to be careful to manage it properly. Play was never intended by God to keep you from fulfilling your obligations as a follower of Christ, and maintaining balance in the Christian life is extremely important.

Whenever we allow play to become so important to us that it dominates everything and our relationships with God and our loved ones begin to suffer, we need to take a hard look at our play. And if the quality of our work begins to be affected, that's when we need to consider rearranging our priorities and our schedules so that we work a little more and play a little less. If you struggle along these lines, seek help and invite others to bring accountability and balance to your lopsided life.

A second danger I would mention is when our play gets too wrapped up with our identity and our sense of who we are. It's easy to get too serious about play, and we can become so competitive that we lose perspective and it becomes too important for us to win. Play can become an idol, just like anything else in life. That's when we take a good thing and make it an ultimate thing so that we begin to orient our lives around it, and we start to love to play way too much. When this happens, success or failure in our play determines how we feel about ourselves, and it shapes our identity negatively to our detriment.

The Academy Award-winning film *Chariots of Fire* is the story of two runners who competed in the 1924 Olympic Games for England – Harold Abrahams and Eric Liddell. Abrahams, who was Jewish, ran in order to prove his worth, and only by being a success did he think he could overcome the anti-Semitism he experienced from his fellow countrymen. When asked by his girlfriend if he loved to run, he said, "I'm more an addict. It's a compulsion. A weapon." And as he waits for the finals of the 100 meter dash, he tells his friend that he's scared. And then he adds, "Ten lonely seconds to justify my existence."

By contrast Eric Liddell, who was a Christian, ran for the sheer pleasure of it. In one of the great scenes in the film, Liddell talks to his sister and tells her he is going to return to China as a missionary. But then Eric says to her, "I know God made me for a purpose – for China. But He also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure. It's not just fun. To win is to honor God." And win he did. Liddell captured the gold medal in the 400 meter race. But he understood that his play was separate from his identity as a child of God, and he didn't make his running an idol.

IV. Becoming Like Children in Our Play.

(SLIDE) In the passage of Scripture we've read this morning, we learn of a time in the ministry of Jesus when people tried to prevent children from bothering

Him. But Jesus corrected His disciples and He told them, *“Let the little children come to me and don’t hinder them. For to such belongs the kingdom of God.”* Then the Lord added, *“Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”* And He took the children in His arms, placed His hands on them and He blessed them” (Mk. 10:14-15).

If you and I want to fully experience the spiritual life God intends for us, we’ve got to become like children. And I believe that includes becoming more like children in our play.

Have you ever noticed that play is the universal language of kids all over the world? It doesn’t matter in what country you find them, children have an innate God-given drive and ability to play, even when they don’t speak the same language. Last summer I went to the Dominican Republic on the family mission trip from our church, and it was so fun to watch the kids from our group play with the kids in the DR. Even when they don’t speak the same language, children connect through play and it’s part of the glue which holds people together in the social fabric of life.

The world is marked these days by so much stress and divisiveness, and there is great need for more joy and more playfulness. All of us would be much healthier – physically, mentally and spiritually – if we played more. God has provided us with plenty of opportunities to do so through His creation. There are trails to hike and lakes and oceans to swim in. There are trees to climb and caves to explore. There are stamps to collect and flowers to smell. Many of us have pets that are just waiting for us to play with them. There is really no excuse for us not to be more playful. It is part of what it means to be a child of God.

My friend Jim Singleton is the most playful person I know. If you’ve ever been around him, you know just what I’m talking about. He is simply a playful individual. And every time I talk to Jim on the phone or spend time with him in person, I always come away with a sense of joy and my burdens don’t feel so heavy. He makes me laugh like nobody else, and he helps me not take myself so seriously.

Once when we attended a conference together, we arranged to room with one another at a hotel. Jim arrived earlier than I did, and he decided to take a shower to freshen up from his trip. As he was toweling off in the bathroom, he heard the door to the hotel room open. Assuming it was me, he wrapped the towel around his waist and jumped out from the bathroom in order to scare me, and he yelled, “Boo!”

It was then Jim discovered it was a bellman that had come into the room, and he was delivering extra towels. The bellman’s eyes got as wide as saucers, and he shouted at Jim, “Don’t dooooo that!” It almost gave the guy a heart attack.

When I arrive 15 minutes later, Jim was still laughing about what had happened, and we laughed together as he told me the story – several times! Later that afternoon, we were walking through the lobby of the hotel to go to a meeting, and Jim saw the bellman. He walked up to the man and tried to apologize again for what he had done, but before Jim could get a word out the bellman said, “Don’t dooooo that ever again!”

Conclusion.

I have an assignment for you. It involves three things I want you to do in the next week. The first is that if you are able and don’t have commitments you can’t rearrange; I want you to try and relax and make some time simply to play the rest of today. Make a Sabbath rest for you and your family today, which also includes recreation that is re-creation.

The second thing I want you to do is to ask yourself if there is any part of your play to which you might be addicted. If you’re unsure if it’s a problem, ask your spouse, or your parents, or a close friend you trust. And if you think you may have a problem, then fast from that activity of play for a week and see if it bothers you. That’s a good way to hold your play in check.

The final part of the assignment is to take 10 minutes each day this next week and do something that is purely play. It doesn’t have to be elaborate or extensive. Take a walk, read a book, play a game, sing a song. Do something fun that has no goal to accomplish. Just play, and see if it makes a difference in your life. Maybe even play a practical joke on someone. But it’s got to be a joke that will make them laugh too.

We all need to laugh more in life, and we need to play. How will you bring Jesus in your play this week? Maybe you should just plan to go to the beach later on and have a dance party yourself. My grandson Lleyton would love to help you! Bring Jesus into your play. It’s what every day Jesus is all about. Amen.

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, p. 3.