

18 February 2018

## The Discipline of Play

Mark 2:18-20

One of the earliest questions Jesus had to deal with in his ministry had to do with his frivolity. You do understand how serious that is. We read Mark chapter 2, verses 18-20:

*18 Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, 'Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' 19 Jesus said to them, 'The wedding-guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. 20 The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.'*

The question that the people asked was, “Jesus, how come you and your disciples don’t fast, like other religious sorts? The Pharisees are always fasting, and even John the Baptist and his followers fast. Why not you?” But that leads to another question: Who cares? The people seem to assume that *real* religious leaders will fast, but why? What is it about fasting that makes it so important? All I can suggest is that fasting might show your depth of commitment to your faith. Nobody ever went without food on a lark, so if you do, you’re *serious*.

And religion is supposed to be serious, right? Some of you might question that, but just think for a minute. Who are the great heroes of scripture and of our faith? Well, there’s Moses. Great man. Bit of a temper, but nothing frivolous about him. Elijah? Don’t make me laugh. He certainly never did. Or really any of the great prophets. I love the prophets, but there’s nothing light-hearted in those books. John the Baptist? Deadly serious. Paul? He might have tried to be funny once or twice, but he failed. Definitely humor-impaired. St. Augustine? St. Bernard? St. Dominic? Trust me on this one, these founders of religious orders were not the life of the party. John Calvin? Enough said. Or what about our own founder, John Wesley? Here are some excerpts from the historical questions for religious leaders that John composed, which are still asked of every Methodist seeking ordination. Question 16 is: *Will you recommend fasting or abstinence, both by precept and example?* And question 20 begins: *Will you observe the following directions? a) Be diligent. Never be unemployed. Never be triflingly employed. Never trifle away time?* People, this religion stuff is *serious*. No fooling around!

And, like it or not, I’ll bet this is how you think. Let’s do an experiment. I’m going to list some adjectives, and I want you to picture a person who exemplifies that adjective. For instance, if I were to say “grumpy” I would want you to picture a person with a grumpy face. Got it? Okay, here we go: *pious, moral, righteous, upright, devout, virtuous, upstanding, religious*. Now, were any of the faces that you pictured smiling? See what I mean? One more. This time I want you to summon to mind your mental picture of Jesus’ face. How many got a smile that time? I did. To me, Jesus in the gospels comes across as demanding, certainly, but also laughing. When Jesus talks about Pharisees straining out gnats and swallowing camels, or when he asks them to read aloud the inscription on a coin, or takes the children on his lap, or tells a persistent Syro-

Phoenician woman, “You win! You win! Go home; your daughter is healed!” I swear he’s laughing. Quaker scholar Elton Trueblood has a whole book on *The Humor of Christ*. (And no, there is no sequel on the Humor of the Church.)

So we end up with this: a Lord and Savior with a twinkle in his eye, whom we worship in a church that is not amused. We take our faith seriously, thank you very much, and we will be careful not to “trifle away time,” as our founder charged, in words that have been preserved for us in that pillar of our church: *The Book of Discipline*. (Does anyone else find that hilarious? *Book of Discipline*? Really? Could we try something a little less off-putting? Like *Fifty Shades of Committee Structure*?)

So how did Jesus reply to the people’s question? “How come you don’t fast like other religious sorts?” He says, in essence, “There will be times for fasting and mourning. Right now isn’t one of them.” Hear that. There’s nothing wrong with being serious – just not all the time. Fasting and weeping before God is not an indication of how spiritual you are; it’s an indication that something has happened that has made you sad. There are times when you should weep and fast and pray. But there are other times when life is good. Forcing yourself to be mournful at those times does not mean you’re super devout; it means you’re a wet blanket. You’re boring.

The problem is that we religious sorts too often confuse “important” and “serious,” as if everything that matters must be approached with grim, dutiful determination. But that’s obviously nonsense. Parents, what is the most important thing you have ever done? (I may have just given you a hint.) It was raising your children, right? And was that never fun? Of course it was. It was not only the most important thing you ever did – and sometimes the most painful – but it was also the most joyous. There were times to be serious, and there were times of fear and anxiety, but there were also times of laughter and play. There were family jokes. There were the memories of that time camping at the beach when the tide came in, or that time . . . well, you get the idea. Everything that is truly important is both serious *and* joyful – marriage, parenting, friends, food, music, good books, nature – you name it. And when you take something truly important, and treat it only as a very serious matter, all you’re doing is cutting out the good half.

Faith in Jesus Christ is important. I cannot tell you how important I feel it is. But when we approach it with a constant attitude of grim seriousness, we make it less than it could be. When our attitude toward worship is “Ssh! Sit still and stop fooling around!” We’ve missed something important. When our attitude toward religious education is memorizing Bible facts, we’re ruining something beautiful. When our attitude toward evangelism is getting out there to save the world because *it’s up to us!* all that indicates is a poor understanding both of ourselves and of God.

At a conference last fall, I heard something fascinating. Someone had done an intense longitudinal study of serial killers, trying to find out if there were any common threads in their childhood or families of origin or anything that could help understand how a human being could become a remorseless, calculating murderer. They interviewed hundreds of people connected to serial killers, and they found only one feature common to all of them: they didn’t know how to play. Now, I don’t know how to make of that. There’s a difference between causation and

correlation, and I won't even try to guess which this is. Moreover, this doesn't work in reverse – not every person who doesn't know how to play is destined to be a serial killer. Nevertheless, I have thought about this many times since that conference. What is it about play that is so important? I'll come back to that more than once during this series. For today, though, here is my question: what does that mean for a religion or a denomination or a congregation that is so darn serious about its faith that it has forgotten how to play? Can a humor-impaired church hope to understand our playful Lord?

So, we're switching things around a little this Lenten season. Usually, we think of Lent as a time of imposing some new discipline to help us be a little more serious about our faith. I want to do that, but with "less serious" in place of "more serious." I don't mean for us to be bright and cheerful, even when things are horrible. People who never cry are just as ghastly as people who never laugh. I just mean for us to get better at recognizing that not every moment is serious, that even important things are sometimes fun, that maybe there are things about following Christ that are worth doing because they fill us with joy and not just because we *ought* to do them. And when we have gained that perspective, then we may be able to face even the serious things with a different outlook. With that in mind, I wanted to close with a second reading, from one of the great curmudgeons of scripture, the Preacher of Ecclesiastes, who despite facing the emptiness of this life more honestly than anyone I know, still recognizes that there is joy to be found in all our toil and trouble.

We read Ecclesiastes 5:18-20:

*<sup>18</sup> This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. <sup>19</sup> Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil—this is the gift of God. <sup>20</sup> For they will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts.*