

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Serious Sainly Silliness”
Matthew 18:1-5
November 11, 2018

I’ve always had the hardest time understanding what Jesus was getting at in this moment. I mean, what exactly does it mean to “become like a child?”

Maybe it’s clear to you, but it hasn’t been for me... and I really have wanted to know. I’ve always taken Jesus pretty seriously. It’s probably why I ended up becoming a pastor. This stuff is important, you know.

If Jesus said it, then we’d better figure out this riddle,
especially since this is one of those teachings that ends up recorded in Matthew, and Mark, and Luke. Apparently, it made a lasting impression on the disciples. It must have been pretty central to Jesus’ wisdom. So, we better figure this out, right?

I mean, our souls just might be on the line here.

So, this is no laughing matter.

Whatever you do today as we try to figure out what Jesus meant by becoming like a child, ***don’t laugh!***

In fact, I’ve been thinking...

we might just need to call a business meeting to work this out.

Maybe we could assign a few committees to tackle the issue.

And next week, instead of coffee and conversation, each committee could have PowerPoint presentations to share with us what they learned...

Of course...the kids can get kind of rowdy after church... You know the way they play around with each other? They get crumbs everywhere.

So, parents... how about we make sure our kids practice sitting quietly at home this week... so that during our meeting next week they don’t wiggle or giggle, run or play.

We don’t want any of that, OK?

I’m serious!

One way or another, I want us to get to the bottom of
what Jesus meant when he said,

we need to become like children.

Or... maybe this particular part of the gospel doesn't seem all that important to you.

After all, there's a lot of other serious stuff going on in our world, isn't there? There are the hungry and the homeless. There's racism and sexism.... the sick and the sinners. There are politics and policies to stay on top of.

Maybe... focusing on becoming like children... is a bit frivolous with all the serious problems out there. It certainly has seemed that way to me at times.

I mean, the gospel is serious business...

It's life and death, you know... crucifixion and resurrection... and that sort.

Should all this childishness really be what the church is focusing on?

You could certainly make a serious argument against it...

but apparently... Jesus thinks... ***those serious arguments... will keep you locked out of God's kingdom.***

All ***silliness*** aside, a whole lot of seriousness...does tend to do that.

Our serious selves can keep us trapped outside of God's abundant life. It's one of the greatest trappings of religion. And so, G.K Chesterton warned, "Seriousness isn't a virtue."¹

And he wasn't the only one.

That warning comes up again and again in our tradition.

Belden Lane writes about this some in his book *Backpacking with the Saints*. He says that the saints often remind us that, "A great danger [for leaders in the church is] taking themselves way too seriously."

C. S. Lewis said something similar.

He warned that self-approving solemnness

is one of Screwtape's finest snares. It's one of Evil's great traps.²

In other words, our seriousness... keeps us locked up... and cut off from the Kingdom of God.

And that's... a bit hard to swallow for those of us who take following Jesus quite seriously.

¹ G K Chesterton quote in Lane, *Backpacking with the Saints*, 196.

² Belden C. Lane, *Backpacking with the Saints: Wilderness Hiking as Spiritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 196–97.

After all, that's why most of us are here, right? There are other things we could be doing on a Sunday morning. But we're here, like the disciples in our reading today, because we want to know how to follow God as deeply and truly as possible.

We want to know what it takes to become *deeply immersed in the life of Christ...* or as the disciples put it "*great in the Kingdom.*"

And so, for those of us that have taken our faith pretty seriously and practice it intentionally, it might just be a little troubling that when the disciples asked Jesus about greatness in God...

he didn't say anything about how much time they spent in prayer,
or how much of the scripture they knew.

He didn't say anything about how sacrificial their offerings were,
or how many ministries they participated in.

Jesus didn't mention how committed they were to feeding the hungry,
or fighting for justice,

... as important as we all know those things are.

Jesus certainly taught about those things regularly... We know they can't be ignored.

But apparently, none of them are indicators of how great in God
or how deep in God's Kingdom we've gone.

Not really.

The best indicator of that is for us to ***pull our children right into the center of our attention.***

To watch them...

in their running and jumping,
in their screaming laughter,
and in all their silly playfulness...

and ask ourselves, ***how much...do I resemble them?***

[pause]

It really is hard for us adults, you know.

There's so much we have to attend to in life.

There are so many responsibilities we carry, aren't there?

And besides...that playfulness...feels like foolishness, doesn't it?

It certainly doesn't rise to the top of our priorities for the week.

I know it often doesn't for me. In fact, I've had a tendency in my life to take things ... maybe too seriously... which has led to a bit of melancholy that's haunted me along the way.

I remember one time in particular, about 10 years ago. I had been meeting with a spiritual director for several months... and one day he asked me a question that completely caught me off guard.

"Chris, what do you do for fun?"

I looked at him...kind of curious... and I said with a bit of surprise and embarrassment, "*Nothing.*"

It was kind of a wakeup call 10 years ago.

Then just a couple years ago, in the first semester of my Doctoral program, we were exploring the importance of the leaders' inner world.

And the goal of that semester was to both understand ourselves more deeply and to develop a rule of life, a pattern of living that we'd be committed to... that could help us to become most fully who God created us to be.

So, in all our readings for a semester... we were exploring questions about what our individual rule of life...might need to look like. And one thing that kept popping up on my radar was the importance of play. The spirituality of play. In fact, one author we read said, "Our play is not something separate from our spirituality; it is itself a sign of the presence of God."³

And I started thinking about how little I still play
And... how little most adults play.

**We're too busy, too serious, or too self-conscious;
We're too demanding and too agenda driven.
We're too caught up in accomplishing goals,
being successful and sounding smart.**

In all our high goals and good intentions, we keep ourselves locked out of becoming who God actually created us to be. We keep ourselves from delighting in the most simple things... and from the joy of playing... for absolutely no reason at all.

I mean, when was the last time you let yourself play, just for the joy of it?
Was it yesterday or last month?

³ Ken Shigematsu, *God in My Everything: How an Ancient Rhythm Helps Busy People Enjoy God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2013), 42.

Was it this morning or last year?

I have enough kids living with me that I know the answer for most children.

For them, not an hour can go by without at least a little play.

How about for you?

Belden Lane explains that there is a long tradition... that has recognized some of the holiest people in the world... **are... the most playful and... yes... even child-like.**

The Apostle Paul describes it as, “becoming fools for Christ’s sake.”

Dostoyevsky wrote a whole novel called *The Idiot*. It’s his attempt to describe someone who actually lives in the world with the same open-heartedness as Christ.

Thomas Merton was one of the greatest spiritual leaders of the 20th century. He was widely known as a contemplative monk and author... whose writings were helping so many discover new depth in their soul and prayers.

So much so... that deep seekers would try to go see him. One time a spiritual seeker traveled all the way to the monastery in the middle of nowhere Kentucky just to talk to him... It’s a monastery that holds a constant rule of silence and a disciplined life of prayer.

And when this seeker got there...he found Merton... roaring with laughter on the floor of a guest room with his feet kicking in the air, his black robes all amess, clutching his belly like a fat Friar Tuck.

***There’s a kind of playful simplicity and openness
that marks the deepest saints in our world.***

So... maybe that means we don’t need to have a business meeting, PowerPoints and committees to figure out what Jesus meant.

Maybe we just need to pay attention to the child-like playfulness... that’s still there in each one of us...

.... that child-like playfulness...

that just needs permission to find its way out again.

That’s what Dottie Holekamp was known to do. For those of you, like myself, that never met her, Dottie was Cathy Hartig’s mom. Cathy once told me that when she pictures her mom, she pictures her laughing.

Carolyn Harmon once told me that Dottie was so much fun to be around. She'd tell a joke and right at the punch line she'd slap her hands together and make you laugh... and giggle. Sometimes you couldn't help but get a stitch in your side when you were around her...

It was just her personality. She was adventurous and fun, and playful...

Like the time Dottie was in her mid 70s...she put aside her AARP card, put on her swimsuit and climbed up on the diving board. And there, in all her 70- something- glory, with her friends and family laughing, Dottie dove into the deep end of the pool.

It didn't matter that it looked a little foolish...

In fact, that's probably why she decided to do it.

One writer says that holy-playful-saints, "laugh at what others take seriously and take seriously what others laugh at."

So, I imagine Dottie came out of the water laughing... both at how fun it was to feel alive... and laughing at anyone who thought she was too old for such shenanigans.

From what I hear, Dottie... ***understood what it was to be great in the Kingdom of God.***

I know some of you do.

I've heard your holy laughter... and seen your playful spirits.

In fact, in case some of you missed it, I want to show you a picture of our 91-year-old here at Dayspring that showed up on my Facebook feed this week...

[Toni picture]

I love this picture... and so I had to ask her about it. Toni said that she came out of a restaurant and there her great-granddaughter was, swinging on that light pole. And so, Toni decided to jump up on the light pole and join in the fun.

And I can imagine that everyone in their family got such a laugh at it, that they couldn't help but pull their phones out and capture the moment.

In fact, the more I look at this picture,

the more I see it as a sacred icon... of what Jesus was trying to teach us about greatness in the Kingdom of God.

This is what it looks like to become full of the life of God.

Being free enough... to join in the fun.

Being open enough... to play like a child... and delight in the moment...

Being able to laugh at yourself... is maybe the surest sign of spiritual growth.

In fact, Belden Lane says you can count this as a principle. "Progress in the spiritual life is seldom what you expect. It brings an increase in foolishness, not sanctity; laughter at one's failures, not gravity at one's self-importance. [When you make progress in the spiritual life, you end up] ***befuddled.... discovering the holy in the last place you anticipated.***"⁴

"I assure you," Jesus said, "unless you become like the children, you won't be able to enter the Kingdom of God."

Which has me thinking... that maybe...

maybe the most holy place at our church...

will end up being the new playground we're hoping to build.

Children climbing, and swinging, and sliding... just for the pure joy of it!

Children running and playing together... because why wouldn't you?

And having all that... ***right here in the middle of the seriousness of our weeks and years...***

That does something holy and profound to us.

You see, the playground we're hoping to build, it really isn't just for the kids. It will be a place that I hope all of us will want to gather from time to time... ***pulling our children into the center of our attention.***

And when that happens...

that playground may just invite us to hop on a swing,

or climb up a slide, or dance around a lamp post...

... and allow ourselves to be a little foolish... and be made alive!

Because you see, laughter and play are some of the holiest sounds of our world.

They are healing to the body, mind and heart.

When we play, we break free of all the things that so easily entangle us...

and allow our spirit to breathe and become alive again.

Which means then... that playgrounds ***are*** holy places of resurrection.

Maybe you've never thought of a playground as a holy place before but remember

⁴ Lane, *Backpacking with the Saints*, 197.

[When you make progress in the spiritual life, you end up] *Befuddled.... discovering the holy in the last place you anticipated.*⁵

Today, I want to invite us to wake up and embrace our childhood selves...
by doing something a little foolish... and a whole lot child-like.

I know it's cold outside, but that doesn't stop children from wanting to go outside.
So, I'm going to ask all of us that are able, to go outside down to the current playground.
We'll gather around that to finish our service.

Then we'll come back into Anniversary Hall for our lunch together. So, if you can't go outside, you're welcome to wait for us downstairs. But if you can go, we've set up a few chairs in the parking lot for individuals that need them and the rest of us will encircle the playground.

Also, please take your worship guide with you. We'll be using that out there.
You can go out the side here, or out the side of the Narthex...
Let's make our way now.

Imaginative Exercise at the Playground.

As we look at our current playground... I want to invite you to try to remember yourself at 4, or 7, or 12 years old... Try to picture that childhood self. It's still in you.

Try to remember what it was like to run around with your friends,
and make up games,
and turn just about everything into play.

Do you remember pumping your legs on the swings
or crossing the monkey bars,
or sliding down a long twisty slide?

Do you remember how much you loved it?

Do you remember how you just wanted to go out and play... for no reason at all except that it was fun?

Try to picture one of those moments from your childhood...

Your childhood self is still in you.

⁵ Lane, *Backpacking with the Saints*, 197.

So, ask yourself, what will it take for you to let her or him out to play again?

[pause]

As you're asking that,

I want you to picture some of our children, those out here, and those that are too young, but will be in the next few years:

- Mia and Hunter Crump
- Ripley and Loxley Harris
- Robert and Rebecca Ell's new baby, Patricia.
- Ben and Jen Hendrix new baby, Adelyn.
- Not to mention the 25 kids that run around during our MOPS ministry and our Parents Night Out ministry....and the many kids that end up on our property over the course of a month.

There's more than you know.

Imagine what a gift a beautiful playground will be for them...

and what a gift it will be for the moms and dads that know their church is a place they can gather with other moms and dads...

and sit on a bench... and share stories with each other... as their kids play.

That's what's possible.

The playground... may just become one of the most holy places at our church... as it begins to shape something wonderful in all our lives.

So, as we dream together about this,

I want to invite you to take your Worship Guide in hand.
and join me in the Litany...

Meditation:

"Modern investigators of miraculous history have solemnly admitted that a characteristic of the great saints is their power of "levitation." They might go further; a characteristic of the great saints is their power of levity. Angels can fly because they can take themselves lightly."

~G. K. Chesterton, quoted in Lane's *Backpacking with the Saints*, 193.