

“Speaking of Play”

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

Sunday, July 10, 2022

Texts: 1 Corinthians 14: 2-12 and John 16: 16-25

It is true that today's scripture passages are not easy to understand, especially related to the “play” theme. I draw your attention, though, to the 1 Corinthians passage in which the Apostle Paul is talking about how we speak privately versus publicly. In public, he is exhorting us to speak to the public in a way they understand. Eugene Peterson, in his translation of the Bible called *The Message*, says it this way, quoting verse 12: “since you're so eager to participate in what God is doing, why don't you concentrate on doing what helps everyone in the church?” Language. How we say things matters, but most importantly, it's not how we say things, but how they are understood.

All the major child development people I know about talk about play as a way that children develop language. Remember Mr. Rogers? I came across a quote from him on the website for the Central Institute for the Deaf. Rogers said, “Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood.”

That took me back to our neighborhood in Owosso, where I grew up. Like many of you, we played outside from mid-morning (or as soon as chores were done) until the streetlights came on – most of the time. A favorite game of ours was to play football, either in our yard, or the neighbor's. We followed many of the basic rules of football, but there were specific ones for the field we played on, and for who was playing. We often played touch if some of the younger kids played, but it was always tackle football for us “older” kids. There were rules about how you could block, and how high you had to count before you could rush the quarterback. Many times, the rules worked, but I'm sure you can imagine that at other times, there were discrepancies! More than once a kid went home mad, and maybe crying, not because they were physically hurt, but because they were mad about how the rules were interpreted and carried out.

“To develop language for meaningful communication, children must have mental imagery, representational and thinking skills. (Westby, 1980)” Often, these skills are learned in play.

I wonder how much this holds true for adults?

It's clear that adults struggle with communication all the time, almost literally “speaking in tongues” to one another, while all the time using the same

What did we learn here? I think we learned that it is harder to communicate than we think it is. Even when “playing” together! In what other ways do we not communicate with one another within the church? How about in the community? Could play help us learn some communication skills? Could we grow in relationship if we spent some time clearly communicating what we mean? It certainly will take longer at first, and seem inefficient, but I don’t think it’s a secret that we have a serious communication issue within our community and in our nation. We think everybody knows, but they don’t. We think everyone is on board, but they aren’t. We believe we have common understandings, but sometimes, not so much. The point here is that we leave much of communication up to dumb luck, believing that people will catch on sooner or later if they keep on keepin’ on.

But the church doesn’t have that time. We need to be clearer, and it is a fundamental part of our welcoming the newcomer. Where is coffee hour held? When does choir, book study, bible study, women’s fellowship...you name it...when do they meet and who can come? What is a salad luncheon for those who never attended?

English language. I got to wondering, could play help adults communicate better? We believe that children learn basic language and communication skills from play, but I wonder about adults. So, we're going to try it out. I have no doubt that all communications in this church, and between us and the community, are completely clear and are always understood. But just in case I'm wrong... Let's try a game. (Pass out bubbles).

I brought bubbles this morning...hopefully enough for everyone. To make them work, you have to open the bottle, pull the wand out, and blow. Sounds simple. But wait! We need some rules, don't we? First, we didn't do this inside. Do we need others (survey those in attendance)? Now that we have rules, feel free to go ahead and make all the bubbles you want. Just be sure you follow the rules.

(For those reading, my guess is that we will not have made some rules we should have, made rules we shouldn't have, and several may be misunderstood. My role will be to pick those out. First among those will likely be no one determined when we would stop 😊 After we play, and go through a couple of iterations, I'll close...)

I'm not trying to criticize you or me, because we are incredibly well intentioned, and we want people to be a part of this group of people at this particular church. How do others know that? We can say it, but how we communicate in all that we do is critical to the newcomer feeling welcome. Speaking of play, do we ever ask others to play with us? When we do, do we tell them the rules, or do we just hope they figure it out?

I think if the roles were reversed, you would want to know. You would want to be "clued in". Language is so important, and yet often, we simply don't pay attention to it. It is our call to speak in a language others understand if we want them to come play with us. I invite you to consider are there ways we could do this better?

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.

1

!

,

1

!

1

,

!

1