6/19/22

Harmony Is Next to Godliness

(J.S.Bach)

Last week, Pastor Greg introduced the topic for our current sermon series: “Play.”

Now to some, “play” might seem an odd subject to address in church. I can hear my German Protestant ancestors scolding that we’re not here to have fun, there are more important matters in life than having a good time. Playing cards? Frivolous. Dancing? Scandalous! We’re here to work six days, and worship on the seventh.

There are countless examples of religious sects and denominations that seem humorless—the fire-and brimstone preacher, the sober monk, the quiet Quaker, the self-flagellating Shi’ite—, these religious folk might find “play” irrelevant; sometimes there seems to be a belief that if religion doesn’t hurt, it’s not working!

But actually play has long been understood to be an essential part of God’s Creation. The ancient Hindu concept, “Lila,” can be loosely translated as “divine play;” the idea is that the universe and all reality are the outcome of creative play by Brahman, the divine absolute. Spiritual journeys have been likened to a game of God playing hide-and-seek—with God— as each of us is led to the discovery of the divine within. And the stories of fun-loving gods in the ancient tales of the Hindu religion show their understanding of the playful aspect of the divine.

Or consider the Buddhist perspective; the American Buddhist, Pema Chödrön, in her book, The Wisdom Of No Escape: And the Path of Loving-Kindness, describes the importance of “letting go of holding back.” She asks, “If our edge is like a huge stone wall with a door in it, how do we learn to open that door and step through it again and again, so that life becomes a process of growing up, becoming more and more fearless and flexible, more and more able to play like a raven in the wind?” She goes on to describe how the wilder the weather is, the more the ravens love it….”At some point they just let go into the wind and let it blow them away. Then they play on it, they float on it.” She describes the birds as playful and joyful, with a zest for the challenges of life, and concludes, “ it adds up to tremendous beauty and inspiration and uplifted feeling. The same goes for us.”

Chödrön makes clear that play is part of the nature of things, and learning to be as fearless and playful as a raven in the wind is part of our journey of awakening.

As Christians, we look to the words of Jesus. Pastor Greg reminded us last week that Jesus asks us to “become like little children.” What do little children like to do, more than anything else? Play.

What children instinctively understand is that life is fully enjoyed only “in the moment;” being “in the moment” is the essential quality of play. Too often, we adults are pulled into the past or into the future in our minds, and find ourselves dwelling in artificial realms of thought; maybe we’re re-living old wounds and grievances over and over, or letting fear construct distracting future scenarios that take us away from God’s presence here and now. In asking us to be like children, Jesus is asking us to be present, to apprehend the Kingdom of Heaven in and around us right now. “Do not worry about tomorrow,” he says in the Sermon On the Mount, stressing how it is only in the present that we can find God.

How can we learn to pull away from the mental games that produce regret, worry and fear, and come back to living in the present, like a child?

One way is to play.

And there are so many ways to play. Look at the word, itself: we can play with our friends, we can play a sport, we can play cards, we can put on a play.

Here’s one of my favorites: we can play the piano.

[*walks to piano*]

Now the world of sound in which a musician operates is both ordered and beautiful. God has created, in the natural world, a playground of infinite aural possibilities. Here’s a short music lesson, based on the science of acoustics: something causes a vibration—say bowing a violin string, or blowing through a clarinet reed (or hitting key on a piano)—and that vibration travels through the air until it reaches our ears. I’ll play some octaves on the piano: [*plays*] these are intervals eight notes apart, and we call this “the same note, only higher;” did you know that each higher octave sends out a sound wave exactly double the speed of the one below? This famous note [*plays*] we call A-440 vibrates at 440 times per second, and this note [*plays*] an octave higher, vibrates at 880 times per second; this doubling of vibrations at the octave is a fundamental property of music.

So we get “the same note, only higher” with a simple two-to-one vibration ratio, and if we throw in some other simple ratios—3 to 2 for the fifth [*plays*], 5 to 4 for the major third [*plays*]—we get this sound, that we call the major chord [*plays*], a sound of beauty and repose. Without going onto details, these tones occur naturally in the “overtone” series of any instrument: this chord appeals because this is the way God designed sound.

And if the vibrational ratios are not simple, but rather complex, you will get a different emotional reaction. For example, here is a very disconcerting interval, the “tri-tone,” that musicians nickname “the devil’s interval.”[*plays*] Quite disturbing; that’s because the ratio between the tone’s vibrations is not simple like two to one, or three to two—it’s 1.4046639231824417009602…I’m going to stop there; the decimal part repeats after the 81st place) to one. A complex ratio and an unsettling chord. We have emotional reactions to sounds based on their physical and mathematical properties; that’s how music can explore different moods—by taking the tones Mother Nature has provided, and putting them together in different ways. The point I’m making is that music arises out of the natural world; God’s Creation has provided all the elements for us to explore in the world of sound.

So we can move these tones around to create different moods…

[*plays a few different moods on piano—a love song, patriotic, bluesy, inspirational*]

So that’s just a glimpse into the world of sound that God created for us to play in. As the incomparable Johann Sebastian Bach put it, “ Harmony is next to Godliness.”

Think about how a rainbow is ordered and beautiful, just like music—an element of Creation that can speak to the human heart. So playing the piano is in some ways like jumping into a rainbow!

And keep in mind, that however long the piece, I play only one note or one chord at a time; the piano player must always be “in the moment,” for the whole piece to unfold, with full attention note by note.

Now consider how this “in the moment” quality that exists in the world of music—and in every other kind of “play”—corresponds to the silent practices of meditation and prayer. If we are following our breath in meditation, we are following each breath; as we cannot take a future breath or a past breath, we stay in the moment. When we open up our hearts to God in prayer, we bring ourselves to be fully present in that moment—and like playing the piano, that takes practice!

So in conclusion, we can see “play” all around us in God’s creation, and we are invited to join in. We can play with colors and shapes, with movement, with sounds and words. In playing with others, we build community. In play, we discover beauty and joy. We learn to live in the moment, and it is by living in the moment that we can catch a glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven!

In the many Names of God: Amen!