

Christmas Eve Reflections 2011
Aspen Community United Methodist Church
December 24, 2011

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The carols we have sung and the scriptures we have read
tell the story of God coming into our lives as a child.

This is a life giving story – a story for all time.

God loves us deeply
and draws us toward the good - if we can be open.

You have a story too – each of you.

You long for the good
and you depend upon the grace of God to guide your path.

If your story is not all you want it to be -
if you have doubts about your direction -
if it is what God has in mind for you - you are not alone.

I expect we all do.

I would like to talk about -
how to be more open to God in your life.

As an adult Jesus will say
that those who want to enter the kingdom of God
must do so as a child.

In Mark 10 Jesus says:
Whoever does not receive the kingdom as a child does not enter it.

What is it about the child?
What does a child do?

A child is often saying things like, "What if?"

A child suspends the rational and imagines what might be.

A child lives in the moment.

A child is open to being loved.
It just comes so naturally.

A child knows joy easily.

A child plays.

I would like to talk about play.

Have you ever thought about the opposite of play?

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Is the opposite of play work?
Is the opposite of play is to do nothing – or to rest?

Stuart Brown is a medical doctor and researcher
who says that the opposite of play isn't work.
The opposite of play is depression.

Wow! Where did he get that?

I'll tell you about that.

When I was in college at the University of Texas
a long time ago during the summer of 1966 - in Austin -
Charles Whitman went to the top of the tower
in the center of campus with a rifle and began shooting people.
He killed sixteen people and wounded thirty-two others.

Sometime after that the governor of Texas asked Dr. Brown
to study the life of the man who committed these crimes
and see what could be learned.

This is what Dr. Brown found.

Charles Whitman grew up in a very dysfunctional - high stress family -
with very little play.

Dr. Brown went on to study other death row inmates.
He found that a high percentage of them
had not played normally or freely as children.

There was very little if any play in their lives as children.

All this led Dr. Brown to conclude that the opposite of play is not work.
The opposite of play is not rest.
The opposite of play is depression.

How well we play is related to our social lives - our creative lives - and our work lives.
Our happiness depends on it.

There is a place in Hebrews that says
"God has anointed you with the oil of gladness."

Proverbs 17:22 says "A happy heart is good medicine
and a cheerful mind works healing."

Laughing is always good medicine.
We now know that laughing boosts the immune system.
Laughter and play seem often to happen in tandem.

God has been trying to tell us that a long time – if you think about it.

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Think about tonight's story.

And, remember the Old Testament story
when 92 year old Sarah learned she was going to have a child.
That's pretty amusing.

She laughed. She needed to – I guess.
And we learned that the Divine has a sense of humor.

God wants us to have joy.

Maybe the grace of God guiding your path
is reminding you to be more playful like a child
or playful like the angels we sing about tonight.



Sometimes we think happiness will happen
at some time in the future when something is different.

We are too busy getting to somewhere.
We will be happy when we finish school.
or when we get a new job
or when we get married - or get divorced -
when we have children – when children grow up.
You name it.

Happiness is over there somewhere -
as if happiness were the destination - instead of the journey.
And if we are missing the joy - we are missing something we need.
Play is vital no matter what your age.

What is play?
Play is spontaneous
catching an eye for something fun in the midst of something mundane -
or seeing the world around us with an eye out for novelty.

You may have seen the pictures of the polar bear and the sled dogs
circulating on the internet.

You would have thought the hungry polar bear
would have attacked and eaten the tethered sled dogs.

But they ended up playing.

What made for that?

It may offer a clue to something we have in us
that we don't use enough -
spontaneous play.

Well – we are not encountering dangerous polar bears
but we do engage all the time
in situations that could be made much easier

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with a lightness of heart and an open mind.

Sometimes in our relationships we just wait
for that person to do that thing that sets us off.

Sometimes we just dread certain encounters at work.

Maybe it's not supposed to be that way.
Maybe we are to play more and agonize less.

There is a story happening in Bethlehem tonight and we are invited.

It's a joyful story in the midst of some pretty hard circumstances.
Hard circumstances are here today for many people.

With the Christmas story sometimes we get caught up
in whether the story happened as it is written – or happened at all.

And we don't think about what God might be trying to convey
in a way we humans can understand here and now.

The Bible is full of deep and meaningful stories -
about how to live fully and freely and in communion with God.

The Bible is full of deep and meaningful stories -
that link you and I to the good God has in mind for us.



We talk about all the stress involved in preparing for Christmas.
Perhaps we have it backwards.

Think of the words we sing.
Hear the playfulness in the angels.

God comes into your life and mine tonight.
Let's remember that children play.

Maybe you lost that playfulness somewhere along the way.
Life will do that.

That's reason enough to need Christmas.

Let's call them Christmas moments -
that we want in our life -
child-like moments - when we experience a lightness of being -
and a bent toward joy.

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Sometimes it waits for the silence
in which the voice of God calls to the child in us we have left behind.

Sometimes the gift of Christmas is something that sneaks up on us
at unexpected moments after all the activities.

It may come in the wee hours of the morning
after a long night spent wrapping gifts.

It may come when our child or grandchild or neighborhood kid
offers a small gift and a spontaneous hug -
instead of a hurried "hi" and scuttling away.

Unless we experience the Christmas moments
the holiday is all about "to do" lists.

Until the Christmas moment we have been concerned
About so many things are also important.

Until we have the space for Christmas moments¹ -
playful open moments of surprise and love -
Christmas is just chaotic.

But then the Christmas moment happens.
We hear the cries of the baby out of a barn in little Bethlehem -
and we remember the Divine has something in mind.

"The hopes and fears of all the years are met" in the cry of the baby –

and God calling you back -
to be his precious child -

God calling you back to discover the child again
or perhaps for the first time.

Yes – those are Christmas moments and you don't want to miss them.

Make room for playful moments.
Make room for them all year.

Merry Christmas

Amen.

¹ Adapted from Leonard Sweet