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DATE

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DURATION

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2 SPEAKERS

Speaker1

Speaker2

START OF TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:00] Speaker1

The following is a message from Wellsprings Congregation.

[00:00:04] Speaker2

So last time I was here in this pulpit was our annual day of remembrance service. Think one of our holiest and most emotionally resonant and at times difficult Sundays of the year. And so he's one of the most powerful. And little did I know that two days after that day of remembrance service. My own father would die. So I have a, shall we say, some feelings. Being back in this pulpit this morning. I could make my whole message about my father. But it's not what I'm here for. But we'll say this. My dad was an incredibly complex guy. He had a lot of different parts and sides to his personality. And sometimes his different parts. They weren't all that good at kind of coordinating with each other. That's the gentlest I can put it. My dad could seem at times as if he was somewhat emotionally withholding, standoffish family friend's child growing up. A young woman who years later I would end up performing her wedding a couple of years younger than me, she said. Mr. Beldon to her parents one day. Mr. Belden is a stern man and that was one of my dad's facets of his personality. But my dad could also be, and not many people saw this. I did. Incredibly playful, giddy, funny. And I'll share just one aspect of that with you, it's a memory of my own childhood, but even more I saw it with my younger sister and then eventually with his grandkids, I'm going to try to act it out and I'm going to be intentionally goofy here, and I probably will look like a fool, which is the point, right? And this is me just normalizing.

[00:02:31] Speaker2

I'm about to do. But he would pick up a child again. It was me at one point and he would sing this little song and the dad, he dances with the baby and they dance the all around the room and they dance and they dance. And then the dramatic pause kissy. That was my dad. I miss him. I miss him a lot. So today, even if it's not all about him, this message is for him. And one of the lessons that he gave me today, I want to talk about play. And playfulness and fun as a particular way to access and contact joy as this message series is about and acknowledges, there are so many, so many things that can be thieves of our capacity for joy these days. Josie gave perfect on point voice to all the emotions. We feel that if we are not practicing a kind of radical acceptance with, as she said. Will steal our joy, but if we can't accept that they're there in the midst of these difficult days, we can also then be open in a more flexible way to the presence of joy. And I don't think anything allows us to experience joy more than allowing ourselves to play does.

[00:04:06] Speaker2

I love competitive games and sports. I'm going to spend the whole rest of my afternoon and probably well into the evening watching football, but I am not going to talk about competitive games today. And in fact. Recently in our culture and particularly through the honesty and the vulnerability, talk about accepting emotions, the lives of a number of young athletes, particularly young athletes of color. Naomi Osaka among them have given voice to the fact that in our hyper competitive world, they are kind of canaries in coal mines, if we will listen to them to the pressure that we place upon ourselves and upon them in terms of representing a certain kind of human excellence and the costs that comes in a hyper competitive environment of expecting excellence all the time. Would be wise to listen to such leaders and teachers because I think they're saying this. I have a hypothesis that I haven't ever fully demonstrated and maybe someone has, but I'm quite seen it, which is this if we want to assess the health of a culture. We should take a look at how many opportunities for play and creation are turned into competitions. We want to take a look at the health of a culture, it's mental health, it's emotional well-being. In the aggregate, we might see how many opportunities for play and creation are turned into competitions. Example, a for me is what the Food Network started out as, which is a place where you could go, where you could learn how to cook.

[00:05:55] Speaker2

And it taught me how to cook. And now you cannot turn in a single night without finding another cooking competition, play and creation becoming competition. Pressure tests and scores and judges and yeah, I watched some of those shows. But the fact that they are so ubiquitous tells us something about how we constrain and contain pure play and creation and make it into competition. And something is lost. When we do that over and over and over again. Some access to ourselves that likes to play and create solely in order to play and create. So like I said, there's a hypothesis at the heart of this message today that I don't know it has ever been fully demonstrated, although I do think it's true. But there has been a lot of research done into what happens to people's in people's lives when play is withheld from them or they are punished for playing. And sadly, this is as current as just this week's news another gun violence atrocity in another school as we know what happened in Michigan and a number of years ago, this guy many, many years ago, if you go to that slide. A guy named Dr. Stuart Brown, he had kind of a grim subject matter. He studied the lives of young adult male murderers, mass murders. Can't remember the fellow's name, but he started by studying the the guy who took a high powered rifle and went up into the tower at University of Texas in Austin all those decades ago, I think in the late 60s and killed like 41 people.

[00:07:51] Speaker2

He studied him and others, and he found a few red threads. Play was punished or play was not permitted. Childhood lacked that capacity for freedom and flexibility and fun. And so Dr. Stuart Brown found these things, then a world without play. You will find this workaholic diminish curiosity, addictions joyousness, interpersonal conflict, rigidity and an absence of empathy. We're play is not permitted. We find cruelty. Loneliness. And we find the absence, I mean, just turn over these onto their sunny side opposites, right? And we'll see so much of what makes our own lives worth living. Ours is a hyper competitive culture. That loves to divide. Winners and losers. And here's the thing we can't all be winners. Not all the time. And so the opposite is assumed. If we are not winning, we are losing. And by the way, this is not just a problem in the pressurized environment of the pandemic, but this is not something we were doing a real good job at pre-pandemic either, right? The mental health challenges, especially amongst our kids. Ubiquitous. And in some ways, I think it's only gotten more challenging now. A kind of more lighthearted way to talk about this is if you know, the movie Talladega Nights The Ballad of Ricky Bobby. Some of you might know the prayer scene, then I'm going to kind of try to recall from memory right now, which manages to do two things as a kind of social critique and while making us laugh quite a bit.

[00:10:05] Speaker2

One. Ricky Bobby The Will Ferrell character, he has a certain way of praying to Jesus, which manages to completely, especially at this Christmas time of the year. I think it's important to remember and and infantilize and sentimentalize the Christian story, this beautiful story of the incarnation of Divine Becoming Flesh. However, we interpret that dear six pound, eight ounce baby Jesus in your crib with your little Jesus diapers, and he goes on and on and on and on, and you can tell from the way he's praying that. That prayer has absolutely no sense of spiritual accountability to it. It's only to make himself feel good in this moment. And then there's this subtler dig. Says something like, if we're not first, we're last. And baby Jesus, we show our first. It's pretty good satire, it gets at the heart of a culture, and I am not critiquing Christianity here, just certain American variants of it. You know, we've all heard the phrase winning souls for Christ. Yeah, maybe we've been on the object I know I have of people who were very enthusiastic about winning my soul for their understanding of Christ. I don't find anything attractive there, but what a different experience of the gospel. It's associated with Francis of Assisi, although he probably didn't actually say it himself, but he said it this way.

[00:11:46] Speaker2

He said share the gospel all the time. Use words if necessary. Share your faith live, your faith incarnate, your faith. With grace and with joy, with love and yes, with play. Because beyond our binary of winning or losing. There is a playful, joyous life. Now, what do I mean by play? Those are just a few words. Spontaneous, self-directed, which is not the same thing as selfish, please hear me on that. It is directed by self. Which is to say it comes from inside. So much of our culture is oriented upon receiving. External awards. In play, the reward is the capacity to play. It's intentional, it's fun, it's pleasurable, not done for an award, but for its own reward. And yes, it has tremendous benefits. The psychological study shows us over and over and over again people, not just children, but starting in childhood, but adults as well too, who allow ourselves the capacity to play, experience all kinds of psychological health benefits and all kinds of what we call pro-social ways of being. We feel more connected. Jack Cornfield, the wonderful American Buddhist teacher, one of the three founders of the Insight Meditation Society in his wonderful work A Path with heart, the perils and the promises of the spiritual life. He tells a story about a young man who became a basketball coach at a school for young people, younger people and teenagers who had challenges with emotional regulation and cognitive disabilities.

[00:13:53] Speaker2

And he went in there with this idea. He would kind of be he would be that after school, special kind of coach, you know, you're going to whip him into shape and they'd win championships and stuff. None of that worked. But what he found was that you could have a second half that was three times the length of the first half. And you could have players who would invent an 85 point shot, and sometimes you would have teams with 10 players on it against another team with three players on it. And he said it was one of the deepest experiences of joy that he had ever had. And if you think is I noticed this within my own mind, OK, but you know, this is for, you know, people with some different kinds of needs than I might have. The next thought after that was, well, if we are constructing illness and wellness in this society in this way. That the fun and the pleasurable stuff and the playful stuff and the breaking the rule stuff in the name of connection stuff is all reserved for people with quote unquote special needs. Then who really here is ill and who really here is well. I have and this is not a brag. Multiple degrees. After college, two Masters degrees, by the time I left my 20s, another master's degree in my 40s, I've had people joke with me and say, Why don't you just go and get a Ph.D.

[00:15:32] Speaker2

already? You can. This is not a brag, but what I want to tell you is up until actually this most recent masters, I did well in school. That's why I kept going. School was actually beset by anxiety. For me. And when I reflect in my own life and I'm doing a lot of this, especially in the last month that since my dad has died, where did I take on this association between learning and anxiety and pressure? It was actually not in my first experience of school, my parents sent me to a Montessori school as my formative experience school. I can't remember that many particular memories from it other than I loved it. I looked forward to it. And then there was the third day of my first grade Muhlenberg Elementary in Allentown, Pennsylvania. And again, I am not wanting to lend based a whole culture here. But let's just say that their attention to orders and rules was very Germanic, very dramatic, and I really love dinosaurs. And I went to check out a book from the library as a first grader on dinosaurs, and I took it up, little me put it up on the counter there for the librarian. And she said No. That book is reserved for third graders, and my parents actually went to bat for me and I remember like three weeks later, I got the dinosaur book, but I got to tell you all the joy was gone by that point.

[00:17:16] Speaker2

And again, I'm not trying to blame this librarian. You know, they probably had rules and dictates, you know, you can't give you, I don't know, dinosaurs having sex or something. I have no idea there wasn't something I was supposed to see as a first grader. The point is I can actually look back on experiences like that in which learning. Became joyless for me. And it's only more recently in my life that I've started to, and I'd say this is an expression of my own personal recovery started to experience the joy, the fun, the playfulness of learning. About the reward of play for itself. Rather than the awards that can come from outside. And so I want to share with you, I want to give this context for I'm about to show you next because there is a certain context in the original context in which about what I'm about to show you was. Was probably done for laughs only and for mockery. But that's not the spirit in which I am offering it to you today. This could be associated. It's been on BuzzFeed, it's been on a website, it's now defunct called regrets, and it's about people creating things that are supposed to look like other things. They don't really look like those things. But what I love about this is that they created something and they shared it. And yes, there's some humor here, but for me, it's the humor of creation, not mockery.

[00:18:52] Speaker2

Now I quit learning droids names in the original trilogy, so whatever that droid is, is what that droid is. But the two things don't quite look alike. Maybe we could say to quote the original Star Wars, you know, this is not the droid you're looking for. But here's the thing. This is a creation that someone wanted to try. And before the internet laughed at it. It was play. Two different kinds of turkeys here. For all we know, the one on the right could taste better than the one on the left. Again, someone tried to create something here. And the end result is not what really matters. Play can involve competition. But is not the point of play. And finally, I think my favorite. I got to tell you, I've looked at this one so many times, you can go with your perfect, beautiful sheep up there on the top. But I have fallen in love with our sad sheep on the bottom. This is the point of creation and play. We never know what's going to happen, and so many of us inhibit our capacity to try something new, something that we might suck at because we're afraid of ending up with the second sheep. And because of that, so many of us live small lives without play. What do you love to do so much that you don't care if you're good at it? That's the thing I want to encourage all of us to do.

[00:20:52] Speaker2

Because it's not just about us, finally, it connects us with other people. Was a writer named Sarah Todd who started to play adult kickball. I'm going to show you a couple of messages in just a second here. Sarah Todd, who was that kid who was always picked last in gym class because she said her legs and her arms didn't do what you were supposed to do to be good at sports. But as part of her working environment, she joined an adult kickball class or a group. And she started to play. And she found a sense of belonging. Enjoy. This is her saying she'll join the team. Ok, Olivia, just talk me into it. Full disclosure I am definitely not Sporty Spice and then the bottom one our team captain spent a lot of time reassuring us, guys, this is for fun, not expertise. It's why I picked kickball the closest thing to a non skill needing sport. And they played in order to play, and they almost won a game. Guys almost tie amazing. But here's the thing. Eventually, they made the playoffs in the league, Sarah said, and they came in second. But that wasn't the point. This kid who had been told she wasn't athletic and couldn't play and couldn't join in found friends and a ritual. And a sense that it is OK to do something badly and still love the hell out of it.

[00:22:27] Speaker2

And yes, I mean that phrase intentionally love the hell out of it, the kind of hell that keeps us from connecting the joy of our own souls. What do you love to do so much that you don't care if you're not good at it? Do that thing. Because ultimately, it is the truth of our universalism beyond dividing the winners from the losers. This universalist tradition that says this. There is a love so special. We don't need to be special in order to be loved. This is what playing invites us into. Which of us is not dying? And our world often as well for that kind of acceptance, belonging, joy and love. And we all allow ourselves a little bit today. To play. Amen. May you live in blessing? And you pray with me. God of the awkward and the inexpert. And of the things that we love to do, but don't do well, we allow ourselves to. Have the permission, the grace, the joy, the acceptance. Of moving beyond the trap and the cage of expertise. Into the place in which the soul is wild and free and domesticated. And can experience itself, perhaps for the first time. Beyond all the labels of win and lose and good and bad. That's simply to play and to laugh. Is to find, again, a kind of love. And to know that we are a part of this life. All of us.

[00:24:54] Speaker1

Amen. If you enjoy this message and would like to support the mission of Wellsprings. Go to our web site WellspringsUU.org That's wellsprings the letters u u dot ORG



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