

**Life & Faith Lessons Learned in A Playground**

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***“God’s Playground” (based on Psalm 100)***

***Everyday Psalms, written by James Taylor***

***Leap and dance with joy—***

***The showers have ended, the sun has come out again.***

***Splash through the puddles!***

***Roll in the grass!***

***Let laughter rise in the air like flights of sparrows!***

***This is God’s world!***

***God made it, God made us and it is good!***

***We spoil it if we stare at it through sour faces.***

***God set us free to frolic, to gambol,***

***To celebrate the gift of life.***

***So dance your way down the garden;***

***Scatter rose-petals with every step.***

***With every breath enjoy the goodness of God!***

***From the beginning of time, God has poured out love;***

***God will continue loving ‘til time stops ticking.***

As many of you know, I am a Children’s Program Coordinator at Stratford Public Library. My job is all about sharing literacy and early learning activities with families. It is an awesome, meaningful, and very fun job. In pre-Covid times, before working from home, I spent all day, every day... or at least every weekday... surrounded by families

in the library and at offsite programs throughout Stratford and Perth County. There is a Children's Play Area located just outside of my office, a space where families would spend hours playing, reading and learning together. Any time I was working in my office I would leave the door wide open, welcoming little ones to pop in for a visit. The happy buzz just outside my door was always music to my ears and "filled my joy pockets"....a saying I learned from your own Audrey just last week. For me there is nothing as joyful as the energy and enthusiasm of happy children at play.

James Taylor's version of Psalm 100, that I just read, speaks to that same happy energy and enthusiasm. It offers to me a sense of real hope, and excitement at a time when I struggle to feel either of these things. It is a challenge for many, myself included, during this time of uncertainty, loneliness and isolation to feel excited and hopeful about the situation in the world. However, these words also offered to me inspiration for this morning's message.

I found it interesting that the title of this interpretation of Psalm 100 was entitled "God's Playground." James Taylor hints in his book that "children, unself-consciously exuberant, best convey the sheer joy of this psalm."

He speaks about leaping and dancing with joy, splashing through the puddles, rolling in the grass, letting laughter rise in the air like flights of sparrows." Joy, joy and more joy! I can't help but smile through these words.

He ends the psalm "With every breath, enjoy the goodness of God! From the beginning of time, God has poured out love; God will continue loving 'til time stops ticking."

God's Playground. It's an interesting vision to think about isn't it? It's given me lots to ponder this week, especially as part of my daily walking route with my dog Archie takes me right past the playground of Seaforth Public School. I walk by there often, as I miss the sights and sounds of children at play, and I've learned which times of the day the kids will be outside playing at recess.

It's fun and interesting to watch kids playing....especially the primary students....so full of energy, imagination and enthusiasm. They seem so free and happy.

We've had some extra warm days so far this month, so Archie and I have taken some extra long walks, and we have had the chance to walk many times past the playground. As I watched the children play, I got to thinking this week that we adults could learn a lot from the lessons learned in a playground.

1. As I passed by the swing sets, I noticed that most kids were pumping their legs and making the swings move back and forth all by themselves. But there was one small child who was being pushed by another. I'm not sure why, maybe she hadn't learned to pump her legs, maybe she just liked the company of the other. I considered that maybe they were taking turns pushing each other on the swings. It's harder make a swing move on your own, than it is to ask someone to help you and then return the favour. (pause) That's kind of like life isn't it? Sometimes we **can** do things on our own, and sometimes we need help. How awesome it is that there are helpers, and how awesome it is that we can take our turn helping someone in need.

As I watched them, I wondered for a moment if it was actually OK, during these Covid times, to push a friend on a swing. Was it safe? Was this following social distancing protocols? Then suddenly it occurred to me that it is exactly what Jesus would do.....helping another even when it seemed unexpected or risky. Jesus not only helped those who couldn't help themselves, he encouraged his followers to do the same. He gave them a gentle push to get them moving in this direction.

2. Not far from the swing set on the playground, is the climber, with the ever-challenging monkey bars. I don't know about you, but I was never very good at the monkey bars. I just didn't seem to have the strength needed to get the momentum to swing myself across. I'd get one or two rungs across, and then I'd slip & fall to the ground. Seems to me, that unlike the swings, the monkey bars are not something that someone else can do for you. Sure, they can show you what techniques work for them, but as far as I can tell the monkey bars are something that you can only learn to do with lots of patience, determination and perseverance. And you are bound to get a lot of blisters along the way.

I am guessing that you can think of one or two life lessons, and maybe even some faith lessons, that took some time for you to learn. Faith callouses are the things that we build up when we keep trying, keep believing and pushing forward even in difficult situations. It is important for us to remember when we are reaching out to grab the next rung, that even when it is hard and we feel like we might slip & fall, we are not alone....God is there to catch us. Then we put both feet on the ground, and try again. Don't give up. Persevere. Jesus taught his followers that life isn't always easy, and it won't happen without some pain and suffering along the way, but we are not alone. God is spotting us every step of the way.

3. The kindergarten playground at Seaforth Public School is a fenced in yard all on its own. I suspect that it's to keep the smallest, most vulnerable students safe and probably to keep them from wandering off. If you've ever watched a kindergarten teacher, you will know that they are constantly doing headcounts, making sure all of their children are accounted for, much like a shepherd counts their sheep. If one goes missing, the teacher...or the shepherd... immediately stops what they are doing until the lost one is found. If it is hurt, they take good care of it, mending it back to good health. This kind of reminds us of the scripture from Ezekial this morning, doesn't it? Ezekial promised the people that God will send a shepherd to take care of the weak and vulnerable sheep.

And our Gospel Reading from Matthew speaks about sheep as well. And goats. Those who play nice on the playground and those who do not. Which brings me to the next life and faith lesson to be discovered in the playground.

- 4) There is a Code of Conduct to be followed on the playground. You can't go around being mean or hurting your friends. If you do, there will be consequences....you might have some privileges removed, at least for a time until you are ready to play nice again. Now here's the good news, second chances are offered to you and you are forgiven....both on the school playground and in God's playground. God knows we are bound to mess up from time to time, and God forgives, especially when we are sorry for our mistakes and intentionally try to do better.

Schools are pretty transparent about their Code of Conduct and God is too. God shared with Moses 10 guidelines that would help his people to learn to live in better relationship with God and with one another. The Ten Commandments are a framework for living a more happy and peaceful life. God wants us to all get along in the

playground and Jesus does too. We heard just a few weeks ago, in our reading from Matthew 22:34-37 a Pharisee tried to trip Jesus up by asking him which of the commandments was the greatest. Do you remember what Jesus said?

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it. Love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and prophets hang on these two commandments..”

Treat others as you want to be treated. We hear that in the Bible a few times don't we? And kids hear it in school and when they play on teams too. Which brings me to the next life and faith lesson from a playground.

5) There are lots of games and sports that are team sports to be played in a playground. Being on a team is a great experience. Not only is it fun, but it also really builds community and team spirit. However, it feel really lonely and hurtful not to be invited or feel welcome to be part of a team. We humans sometimes have the tendency, whether consciously or unconsciously, to leave people out. Maybe it's because they are different than we are, or maybe it's because we think they aren't as capable as we are or maybe we just don't think they'd be interested. So we don't invite them, we leave them out, and it's just not nice. Jesus spoke up for those who were marginalized, outcast and overlooked by society time and time again.

If we take a good look at what Jesus was all about, we will see that he was, in the words of Bible scholar and author Marcus Borg, “radically inclusive.” Jesus instructed his disciples, his teammates....to love one another and he exemplified that throughout his life and ministry by honouring and caring about people of all backgrounds.

Jesus would include team members of all kinds, and he would especially reach out to those that others might overlook or disregard...the women, the poor, the oppressed, the sick, the lepers, the tax collectors, the prisoners, the physically & emotionally challenged. Jesus made it clear that there was room on God's team for everyone....the here-and-now possibility of a perfect team that included everyone.

In his book Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, Marcus Borg writes: “Jesus saw the divinity in all people, and he challenged all men to see the good, the God-self, in all people with whom they associated.”

This kind of inclusion is important in playgrounds, and on soccer fields, and it's important in churches too. And this is something that the faith community of Pine River United Church understands very well. In fact, I have learned that you don't just understand it, you practice it. Recently you have just done the work to become an Affirming congregation. Your vision statement reflects your commitment "to share God's love and grace by creating a safe place for all people to engage in a life and ministry that values and affirms a variety of ages, ethnicities abilities, genders, sexual orientations, social and economic classes, beliefs, gender identities, appearances and marital status." This faith community is dedicated to living with respect in creation, honouring diversity through continued education, growth and outreach.

You have a team to lead you through this process, and they are still guiding you through the ongoing steps of this kind of inclusiveness. They have committed to lead you through promoting reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples of Canada by acknowledging their Peoples and Traditional Territories at the beginning of the Sunday worship services. Recently I was grateful that Maithel Lee coached me on how to express this honour and respect by acknowledging that we gather on the land of the traditional Saugeen Ojibway territory and thanking the Indigenous peoples of Canada for their stewardship of the land.

Symbols and signs of inclusion, for example LGBTQ2, wheelchair accessibility, scent free and hearing assistant device, will be displayed at your church. The Affirm United Logo will be displayed on Pine River letterhead, your Facebook page, digital sign, and website. A link to Affirm United website is already available on The Pine River United Church website.

Moving forward there are plans to participate in Pride events and to host events that will explore the important aspects of being an Affirming ministry. You are committed to continuing to learn and grow as an Affirming congregation. Collaboration and networking with local congregations and Affirming Ministries of the United Church of Canada will help you along this path. Additionally, you can and will connect with and encourage other local ministries who choose to enter the Affirming process and offer them support on their journey. This is something to be proud of, and something to celebrate....and you will. You will have an annual celebration of your Affirming Ministry Anniversary with a special worship service.

This is exciting and worth celebrating. You are following Christ's example of inclusiveness, and not leaving anyone out. Everyone is welcome here.

6) Church committees and school clubs often get things moving...they get the wheels in motion in communities. This reminds me of the merry go rounds that were often found in the playground of my youth. Do you remember them? There was a round platform with handles that rotated in a circular motion like a stationary wheel. It stayed in one place but spun in circles. Several children would run around the while holding onto the handles or bars to get the merry go round spinning. Then as the momentum built up, and the merry go round got moving fast enough, the children would jump on to enjoy the ride. I remember that lots of times we would take turns standing still and doing the work of spinning it for our friends so it would continuing moving, not stopping until the riders were ready for it to stop, or spinners were totally exhausted. We learned quickly that the more people who did the work, the easier it was to spin it and the faster the wheel would turn. We also learned that taking turns was the fairest way to do things.

I think that is another important life and faith lesson to be learned from a playground. It is a lot more fun, and a lot less work, when we work together. Unlike the playground merry-go-round that stays in one place going no where, our efforts to work together can result in great things happening.

I think this is especially important to remember right now. Even though it might seem like we are stuck in one time and place, we can still make things happen, we just might have to get creative about the process. Just like the merry-go-round, the momentum probably will build up faster when we ask others to help us get the wheels turning. Combined energy and enthusiasm generally produce greater results. This reminds me of Paul's letter to the Corinthians explaining that we are many parts of the Body of Christ all working together. If one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it. If one part of the body hurts, the other parts of the body hurt as well.

7) This brings me to the next lesson learned in a playground. Remember the sandbox? Oh, what fun we had in the sandbox! Hours and hours spent building castles, houses, roads for our tonka trucks, and even mudpies. Do you remember the one firm rule in every sandbox? Don't throw sand! One tiny grain of sand can cause a lot of pain and damage to a person's eyes. I am guessing some of you, if not all of you have

experienced that painful sensation from time to time. We don't forget that feeling.

I think that words can be very much like grains of sand. Words can be used to build something up and produce great things.... or they can be thrown around in hurtful destructive ways. This is true both inside and outside of the fence of a playground. Though they might seem small and insignificant at the time, hurtful words can cause a lot of pain and suffering, sometimes so much so that they are never forgotten. Over time the sting may lessen, and the tears may wash away the initial pain & discomfort, but you never forget that feeling of having sand thrown in your face. I guess that is why we tell our kids, and other kids in our care "Don't throw sand!" It's just not nice.

8) I'd be remiss if I didn't mention the teeter totter, and I am pretty certain you can draw some of your own conclusions of how the teeter totter is significant in the playground and in life. Teeter totters teach children, and all of us, about the delicate balance of life. There will be ups and there will be downs and we are not on this teeter totter alone, it doesn't work that way. Sometimes it is our job to help lift another up, and sometimes we count on others to help raise us up. We could go into all kinds of other ways to look at the teeter totter, but I will leave that for you to explore and consider through the week. I am guessing you will come up with some great ideas.

9) Walking by the tarmac of the playground I often see children colouring with sidewalk chalk. Most of the children draw lines on the ground, perhaps to play a game of hopscotch or to write their names, however one day earlier this fall I saw a child colouring on the bricks of the school. Interesting, I thought to myself "I wonder if he will get in trouble?" Soon another child joined him, and together they were colouring several bricks, making an interesting pattern. Later that day, I walked by the school wondering if the pattern would still be there, or if perhaps a teacher would have asked them to wash the bricks off. I was pleased to see it was still there and in fact had grown into a bigger and even more interesting pattern. It sort of resembled stain glass, very pretty and inspiring. What started as one idea, one piece of chalk and one brick grew into something incredible. I was excited to realize that such imagination and creativity was not just accepted at the school, it was encouraged.

This is another important faith lesson for us, I think. Throughout his life and ministry Jesus taught his followers to live life in new ways...sometimes unexpected ways.... even ways that weren't always appreciated by the religious leaders or rulers of the time.

He coloured outside the lines. The things he taught them were unlike anything they had ever seen or heard before. These things were often against some of the societal norms and laws of the day, but very much in keeping with God's laws. Through Jesus, people were given a glimpse of understanding to what God's love, compassion, mercy, and grace was all about. In his responses, Jesus always reminded the people in one way or another of the Great Commandment—to love God, and to love our neighbour as we love ourselves.

Today's Gospel reading, Matthew 25:31-46, tells us that Jesus asked his followers to radically serve others. To help the people who needed to be helped the most...those who are hungry, those who are thirsty, those shivering without clothes, those who are lonely, those who are sick, and to even visit the prisoners ...whenever and wherever it is needed. Don't wait for another day, another place, or a better time.

Jesus did not just say the words, he lived them putting his trust and faith in God into action. I think we should too. The Great Commandment calls us to work for God's peace and harmony in a way that is only possible through loving God, our neighbour and ourselves. Today's lesson encourages us to love and serve others, but also gives us perspective how we can serve Jesus himself. Today we learn that in our neighbour, especially in the "least" of all, we see Christ. We see Christ in the hungry, the homeless, the stranger, the sick (both mentally & physically), the imprisoned. We are told that if we are ready to love and serve Jesus, we will be ready to love and serve these.

On this Reign of Christ Sunday, may we consider and celebrate the ways that we play nice in God's Playground. May we also consider ways that we might be able to do better. If the world could only start living in community the way Jesus did, looking out for their neighbour, especially the "least of all", the world would be a much happier place. Everyone would be included, everyone would be loved, everyone could live with great joy & hope. The enthusiasm and joyful sounds of the God's playground could spill out into every neighbourhood. May it be so. May it be so.