

**“Playing in the Kin-dom”**  
**Sermon from Luke 18:9-17**  
**Given Sunday, October 31, 2021**  
**for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville**  
**Reverend Erika Marksburry, Senior Pastor**

*Jesus spoke this parable addressed to those who believed in their own self-righteousness while holding everyone else in contempt: “Two people went up to the Temple to pray; one was a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed like this: ‘I give you thanks, O God, that I’m not like others – greedy, crooked, adulterous – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I pay tithes on everything I earn.’ The other one, however, kept a distance, not even daring to look up to heaven. In real humility, all the tax collector said was, ‘O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.’ Believe me, the tax collector went home from the Temple right with God, while the Pharisee didn’t. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, while those who humble themselves will be exalted.”*

*People even brought their infants forward for Jesus to touch. When the disciples saw this, they scolded the parents.*

*However, Jesus intervened by calling the children to himself. He said, “Let the children come to me. Don’t stop them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these. The truth is, whoever doesn’t welcome the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.”*

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What is the truth of who you are?

Like, when you’re not wearing any sort of costume, any sort of mask, not for a holiday and not for safety and not just because that’s how you’ve learned to get by in the world: what is the truth of who you are?

I've never really gotten this verse - "For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, while those who humble themselves will be exalted."

I mean, I think I get the first part. The Message translation renders it: "If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face." But it's the second part that puzzles me. "Those who humble themselves will be exalted." It feels like a directive, but an impossible one: if we assume postures of humility, but are told that will lead to our own exaltation, then... are we being honest? This is where the Message is helpful. Here it reads: "but if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself." If you're content to simply be yourself, you will become more than yourself.

The commentaries say these guys are both telling the truth about who they are. The Pharisee is righteous. He prays, he gives, he obeys the laws. And the tax collector is not. By virtue of his work, he's in collusion with Rome, and that makes him unfaithful to God's call. Both of these guys are saying what is.

But neither has any joy in that. And aren't we made for joy? Isn't that at least part of the truth of who we are?

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What is the truth of your joy?

Ingrid Fetell Lee, who's book *Joyful* is filled with reflections on how people experience joy and why we sometimes deny it, writes about

the tyranny of “good taste.” She confides that throughout her teens and twenties, she read every design magazine she could get a hold of, and she memorized and abided by the editor’s picks. She stuck to tailored clothes and colors that some expert said were flattering to her body type and skin tone. She admired other shapes, brighter colors, from a safe distance. She writes, “Of course, good taste has a seductive promise: as the name implies, it confers not just style but *goodness*. It suggests that we can go to the store to purchase a chair, a dress, an artwork, and, if we choose right, we might enjoy a healthy dose of appreciation and belonging as well. But the god of good taste demands sacrifice, and it’s always the weird, quirky parts of ourselves that are first to be thrown on the pyre.”

One of those designers who urged good taste was Adolf Loos, who said, “Freedom from ornament is a sign of spiritual strength.” We inherit that idea, and it plays out in how we decorate our buildings and in how we dress our bodies. Lee remembers trying on a ruffled dress and hearing some anonymous voice in her head tell her, “It’s so gaudy.” But do you know the root of “gaudy”? Where it comes from? -- It’s from the Latin *gaudere*, a verb that means to rejoice, or to delight in something. Lee wonders how much joy that anonymous voice, that critic of the gaudy, has sucked out of her life over the years.

Because it’s the weird and the quirky that brings joy, she tells us. Like, we love lots of birds, right? And the flamingo is admittedly a weird one. Bright pink, bendy neck, toothpick legs? But the flamingo is the only bird that we have mass-produced and

scattered across thousands of lawns, especially when we want to have a good time, to bring or share joy.

If you're content to simply be yourself, you will become more than yourself.

If you embrace the truth of your joy, that joy will overflow you.

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Whoever doesn't welcome the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.

So, how does a child welcome the kingdom of God?

My guesses are: not like the Pharisee, with his arrogant prayer about how terrible everyone else is.

And also: not like the tax collector, with his prayer about how terrible he is.

But maybe kids are able to welcome this new world, this kingdom, this reign of justice and joy, just as themselves. Not because kids are so holy or pure, but because there's so much they don't yet know. They don't yet rely on themselves for everything. They don't yet pretend like they've got it all under control, or like they're not worth taking part in the goodness of this world.

But also: they don't yet know about distinctions between who's righteous and who's not. All they know is anybody who will play with them is their friend. And they don't yet know to stifle their joy.

They don't know that their laughter might be too loud, or their clothes might be too bright, or their delight might make them look silly. They haven't yet learned to silence or hide away those parts of themselves. All those things we learn along the way, and then try to unlearn.

When you imagine the kingdom of God, isn't there color and laughter there? Maybe ruffles and flamingos?

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So, how does a child pray?

Honestly, probably, how they're taught.

I wonder if the Pharisee was taught that he was better than other people, who didn't have the time or the luxury or the heart to follow the laws the way he did. I wonder if the tax collector was taught he was worse than other people, who didn't have to or choose to work in collaboration with those who oppressed his own people. I wonder if there's any way the two of them could hear each other...

I wonder what they might teach each other, about the truth of their lives. I wonder what they might teach their children, about the God they both prayed to. I wonder what their children might teach them. About the delight that can be found in repetition: fasting twice a week. Making an offering with every visit to the Temple. Praying at the appointed times. Even confessing, however often is necessary, the ways we fall short.

I wonder if either of these guys could delight in what had become so routine in their lives, that maybe, originally, was meant as gift.

The English theologian G.K. Chesterton, in his book *Orthodoxy*, suggests: “Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, ‘Do it again’; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, ‘Do it again’ to the sun; and every evening, ‘Do it again’ to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them.”

We’re going to watch now a video of lots of FBC folks playing - and most of what people sent in is simple, silly fun. I wonder if these might also be glimpses into the kingdom - filled with delight and play and joy. I wonder if God might see these folks at play and say to them, “Do it again.”