

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *Playing Together*

SERIES: *Community Life*

SCRIPTURES:

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**Credit to John Ortberg;*

Well good morning, it so great to worship with you.

We're in the second week of a sermon series called Community Life (**Series Graphic**).

You and me, we, were created for authentic community, fellowship, relationships...community life! And the church is supposed to be one of the primary places where this happens.

John Ortberg describes the idea this way,

It's kind of like one day God was sitting up in heaven and he told the angels. "I have an idea. I'm going to create something called the church!"

And the Angels said, "Ok what's that?"

God said, "Actually I'm very excited about this idea. Well, I'm excited about all of my ideas. One of the great things about being God is you never have a bad idea. But I'm especially excited about this idea.

Church is going to be the way I connect people, strangers...into loving relationships. It'll work like this: People will choose to become part of a church, they'll begin by

meeting together, regularly, consistently, weekly. And initially they'll be strangers. Nobody will know each others' names or their past, their life experiences. They'll come from all over the place, different towns, different families, different upbringings. They'll have all different kinds of preferences, desires, talents, and even brokenness and failures!"

And the Angels said, "Are they going to get paid to be part of this group?"

God said, "No, in fact it's actually gonna cost them to be part of this group. It will cost them some of their valuable weekend time, it will cost them some of their resources, and for most of them it will be totally awkward getting to know each other for a while. They'll even have take a few minutes each Sunday morning to shake hands with the people around them they don't know."

And the Angels said, "Lord, but who will sign up for a group like that? Why would they do that?"

And that's when God started to get really excited and he said, "Well at first it may be a little odd and confusing...but pretty soon they'll start to know each other, by name. And they'll start to greet each other by name. They'll start to recognize when someone from the group is missing. They'll start to call each other outside of church. And then they'll start to work alongside one another. They'll start feed the hungry and cloth the naked. They'll cry together when something bad happens. They hug each other when someone's feeling lonely or discouraged. They'll celebrate together and raise their voices together in worship.

Because you see at the heart, at the very center of this group is gonna be my son Jesus. The whole purpose of their fellowship, the whole purpose of their gathering, the thing that will unite them will be Jesus.

Failures and weaknesses and sin won't keep anyone out, because Jesus will have died for all that, on their behalf. Everyone will be invited into this community, in his name and in his honor. Pretty soon, if they stick with it, they'll start to experience forgiveness, and peace and togetherness, and contentment and joy. It's gonna be one of the most special things I've ever created." (Illustration Adapted from Ortberg, The Me I Want to Be, Pg. 143-144).

Welcome to church. We're so glad you're here this morning.

Have you ever thought about church, this group, in that way before? Just look around this room, these people, we're intended to be far more than just a group of strangers sitting in a room for one hour every week. We're to be a team, a family united by Jesus! This is why all through the New Testament, the church is referred to as **"brothers and sisters in Christ!"**

And so we're starting the year talking about four key ingredients to Community Life here at Five Forks and how you can participate in that.

Working together – Last week talked about working together as a church. When we come together, use our effort and energy together, it unites us. Thank you to all of you who are already participating and serving and working here at Five Forks. And thank you to those of you last week who stepped up and said I want to be part of something like that.

Play, Pray and Eat.

This morning we want to talk about...playing together.

And of the four messages in this series, this may be the one that is least expected. Community Life at Five Forks includes "playing together". Is that really important? And what exactly do we mean by "playing together"?

I'll just tell you as a parent of three young children this concept is so important to me. A couple of weeks ago I had a reality check. It was right after Christmas, my kids had bought a strategy board game for me for Christmas, called Jaws. Based on the old movie. They know I love strategy board games. It was in the evening and I was reading and three of them came up and said, *"Let's play your new game."* I said, *"I'm reading right now, maybe later."*

The next day, I had a long day at the office didn't get home until later. And I sat down to watch one of my favorite sports shows on Television. They asked to play again. I said, *"I've had a long hard day, I need to rest. Maybe later."*

Couple days later, I was sitting in the living room working on this sermon about the importance of playing together. Kids came running in and said, *"Dad can we play the game now?"* I said, *"Not right now, please leave me alone, I'm trying to write a sermon about the importance of playing together and how playing together builds community and it's vital to the health of our church. So I don't have to time to play with you right now."*

See how that happens?

So this morning we just want to talk about the importance of being a community, a group of people that takes seriously playing together.

A. A theology of play.

So first, we need to clear up a misunderstanding about play and church. Part of the issue is that the word play itself, you don't find too often in the Bible. But we're using the word play this morning just keep things concise...in a broader sense, play, as we'll, see is related to a series of concepts or themes that you do find all

throughout the Bible: **enjoyment, exploring, dreaming, discovery, laughter, abundant life.**

Sadly, many followers of Jesus today, do not experience these words or at least do not associate these concepts with their Christian faith.

For many people church is exactly the opposite of dreaming, laughter and abundant life, play. In fact, for many people church is mostly about rule followings. Do this...don't do that. "Don't run in church." "Don't be loud in church."

Or for a lot of us, church is mostly about "a routine", and just checking that hour off my list of things in the week. Make God happy and then get on with the good stuff, the enjoying stuff in life.

God is trying to keep you from experiencing abundant life.

The Barna Research Group has been doing survey's among young people (teens & twenty's) and their experiences in church.

1/3 of those surveyed said "church is just plain boring."

You remember the old saying related to church...*"No more laughing, no more fun, no more chewing, chewing gum...because the church services have begun."*

Or one author says it like this...

"Some people can't understand how God and happiness could go together. They think religion and fun are fundamentally opposed. To them, God is a cosmic party pooper. A Grinch. A fun sponge. A spoilsport. God is against parties and fun and pleasure, so God is the antithesis of happiness." (Judah Smith 122)

And I do want to say. There is something “sacred” about the gathering of God’s people together and a certain care about not being flippant or frivolous. There appropriate times for play and there are times when play is not appropriate. And I want to acknowledge that. But we have to find the right balance.

And so though we are talking about play as a church, what we might call the “social aspect” of our faith. A concept that is often, neglected and overlooked. But just to be clear, we are not saying that church is simply a social club or a group of friends. Keep in mind this message is part of a larger series where talking about at least 4 aspects of church community Life.

But, if we are not careful, we end up at the other end of the spectrum, where play, fun, laughter, enjoyment and even joy...appear as if they don’t belong in church.

And we give the impression Christianity, your spiritual life and Jesus is supposed to be serious, boring, stale, uninteresting!

There’s a story in the New Testament.

Matthew 19 - ¹³ people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them.

You kind of get this picture of loud, boisterous, active children running around bothering the serious disciples. And the disciples are thinking they’re probably bothering the Rabbi also.

But Jesus says...

¹⁴“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”

The writer and artist Gordon MacKenzie says,

Often, people have dreams for their lives when they are young (kids love to dream and discover and explore and laugh and play), **but over time, they simply give up. He tells of visiting children in kindergarten and asking them, “Who is an artist?” Every hand shot up.** (Because when we’re young we dream big about how we’re going live life.) But he says... **This decreases to half the class by third grade and is almost nonexistent by the time those same children turn 12.**

(Ortberg, The Me I want to be)

Why is that? Because so often, as we grow up, the whole idea of playing, dreaming, laughing becomes too childish and silly. We view playing as frivolous and unproductive.

When we eliminate play we miss a vital part of the community life we were intended to experience.

That is a far cry from some of the major themes we find in Scripture.

John 10:10 - “I have come that you might have life, and have it to the full...”

John 15:11 - Jesus is talking to his disciples and he says, “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

Job 8 - “He will fill your mouth with laughter and your heart with joy.”

Proverbs 17:22 - A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.

Nehemiah 8:10 - Don’t be dejected and sad, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

You see the true essence of playing, is a deep sense of peace, contentment, freedom and joy that ultimately are found in Jesus.

Playing is not an experience that you have “aside from God”, it’s an experience that “comes from God”.

So four aspects of playing (broader sense) that we should be aware of.

1. Playing is about adventure.

Playing is about exploring the world God gave us to experience and enjoy.

Genesis 2 - ⁸ Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. ⁹ The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food.

Do you see what’s going on here...God gave Adam and Eve trees, thousands of trees and bushes, and flowers and then animals...to look at and enjoy. Pleasing to the eye and good for food. It’s kind of like God saying, “I’ll make one of these, see isn’t that cool? And I’ll make one of these, isn’t that cool?”

Sometimes the King James Version just has the best way of saying it...to Adam and Eve God said...

Genesis 1 - have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

³⁰ And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat: and it was so.

God is creating, colors and shapes and textures and smells simply for humans to explore, discover and enjoy.

I was reading about this other day Scientists have classified about 2 million species (plants and animals) but believe there are an estimated 5 million species still undiscovered.

John Ortberg writes about this concept in his book called “All the Places to Go.” He says when you read through the Bible one of the most common commands God gives to people is, “Go.” Jonah...Go to Nineveh and it turns into a whale of a story! David Go...fight the giant. Esther...Go, I need a queen. Daniel...Go, a lions Den.” Peter...Go, walk on water.”

“Almost never does God interrupt someone and ask them to remain in comfort, safety, and familiarity.” Instead he says Go! Explore, discover, enjoy...play in this great big world!

It’s fascinating, in fact, there all kinds of studies that have been done on this. But in general, what we know is that children who “play/explore” using their senses...climbing trees, making mud pies, building forts, riding bikes, play dough, coloring books etc. leads to all kinds of health benefits.

It stimulates brain development, intelligence, creativity, memory, emotional health. Why is that? Because we were created for it.

Second,

2. Playing often involves laughter.

Did you know laughter was God's idea? Humor is not Satan's idea or a result of the fall, human sin. God invented it. Yes, there are times when laughter is not appropriate and can take us off track or cause us to lose focus. But deep down, laughter comes from God.

There's a fantastic book that I recommend to you, **Screwtape Letters**, written by CS Lewis.

Screwtape is an expert evil demon (similar to Satan) and the book is a series of letters he is writing to his nephew Wormwood, whom he is trying to teach how to tempt and deceive Christians. And he says that one of the best ways, to deceive Christians, is to make them believe that all laughter and pleasure and joy is evil...make them think the good things in life are evil, experienced apart from God.

I divide the causes of human laughter into Joy, Fun, and Flippancy... What the real cause is we do not know. Something like it (laughter) ...occurs in Heaven—a meaningless acceleration in the rhythm of celestial experience. Laughter of this kind does us no good and should always be discouraged.

Fun is closely related to Joy—a sort of emotional froth arising from the play instinct. It is very little use to us. It can sometimes be used, to divert humans from something else which the Enemy (God) would like them to be feeling or doing: but in itself it has wholly undesirable tendencies; it promotes charity, courage, contentment, and many other evils.

The theologian Thomas Long once wrote that laughter indicates good theology. **“Because God in Christ has broken the power of sin and death, Christian congregations and their preachers are free to laugh at themselves.”**

1 Peter 1:8-9 - ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible

and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

We followers of Jesus, more than anyone else, have reason for good-hearted laughter. Because in the end authentic laughter comes from a place of the deepest peace, contentment and joy. Which we believe is found in Jesus. You can laugh, because you are safe and secure in the arms of Jesus for eternity.

We want to be a church that knows how to laugh together. Yes, we need to keep in it's proper place, but we need good times of wholesome laughter as a church!

The willingness of a preacher and congregation to laugh together is a healthy sign of spiritual vitality.

Third, one of the reasons that playing and community life are so closely connected is because...

3. Playing together makes the best memories.

Memories are powerful shared experiences of adventure and laughter that connect and unite us intimately with others.

When loved one's have passed and we sit down with families and begin talking, it is often sad and tears are shed...but, but it's also amazing how families immediately go to shared memories and the best memories are the good times, the playing that the family did together and before long some of those tears are tears of laughter. Usually moments of deep laughter and joy that the family shared.

You and I were created for laughter and playing...and when we do, we create memories.

Finally, one last thought about why it's important for the church to recapture a theology of play.

4. Playing crosses boundaries.

I've shared in here before that I grew playing soccer. As silly as it sounds that little round object, has opened doors for relationships all over my world. From Zambia, to Honduras, to Belize, to the Waynesboro high school. I speak a language with those outside these walls.

Playing is something that our world understands and embraces. When the church learns to play well, with right and proper intentions, we communicate to those outside of these walls **"This is a place where they speak my language!"** (Ortberg)

In the end, we want to communicate to the world, God is not here to take your play away. Rather the best kind of play...discovering, exploring, laughing, contentment...the most complete play, is found with God.

So

B. Two Challenges

from this message...this week...first...

a. Play at home

Mom's, dad's, guardians, grandparents – you're kids are growing up.

This week set aside time, for good wholesome family fun. This week make a memory together.

In 8 years when my son Landon is 18 and is getting ready to leave home. I'll likely not remember an extra hour on a sermon or another pile of folded laundry. I'll remember building forts, nerf gun battles, bike rides, hiking, trips to the aquarium...

Husbands and wives.

One of the reasons that many marriages lose some of their excitement and pleasure is that couples stop playing together. You built your relationship going on dates and now you just don't have time any more. Fun, laughter and play just don't fit the schedule.

Set aside an evening, find someone to watch the kids, to go on a date, go bowling, take a walk, sign up for dance lessons.

In one sense there will be nothing serious or productive accomplished but in another sense you might discover that it's the most important thing you've done all week.

Friends...co-workers...join a book club, go out for a paint night, or a game night....

I want to encourage us (Five Forks) to find a way to play with the most important people in our lives, because that's where relationships are built.

Second...we must look for opportunities to play as a church

b. Playing at church

Our teens do this well. In just a couple of weeks they're planning a trip to go watch the Hershey Bears game. What's the purpose...it's for a group of strangers, otherwise disconnected to make a memory, to share an adventure. It's a road trip. It's cranking up the music together on the bus to sing along. To learn each other's names, to laugh together. It's relationship.

Did you know we have an archery ministry here at Five Forks? January – mid-March. Every night of the week, groups come together to shoot archery. In one sense its about having fun, sport, entertainment. But deep down it's about conversations, laughter, and relationships. If you want more info about this group??

Corporately...in June, mark this on your calendar...we'll be holding our annual church picnic. Games for kids outside, food and fellowship in the gym. The whole purpose is to relax and enjoying being part of this unique group together.

Even further into the year. Keep your eyes open for our annual church auction. It's an evening here at the church, part of it about raising funds for certain special projects. But deep down this is about the church family coming together to have fun.

Perhaps the easiest and most practical way for us to do this...is to take the initiative to invite a family from church, into your home to play games on a Friday night or to watch the Superbowl or just to share a meal.

Playing is about adventure, exploring God's grand world, it's about laughter and fun and enjoyment and we were created to experience that, together as a church. If we fail to do this, if church becomes our one hour of sitting together, if church becomes a set of rules or a weekly routine...we'll miss out on this vital part of our community life!