

1st August 2021 – ‘Being playful’

Led by Rev Kate Whyman

GATHERING MUSIC ‘Free’, Aaron Espe

https://youtu.be/I_KdscVWFa8

WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING

Welcome everyone. And a special welcome to anyone joining us for the first time, and to all those of you here today from Brighton – it’s lovely to have you with us again. We’ve missed you! Welcome back.

The theme of this service is ‘Being playful’ and I’d like to begin with some opening words by James Carse, author of a book called ‘Finite and Infinite Games’.

He writes: ‘To be playful is not to be trivial or frivolous, or to act as though nothing of consequence will happen. On the contrary, when we are playful with each other we relate as free persons, and the relationship is open to surprise; everything that happens is of consequence.’

It is, in fact, seriousness that closes itself to consequence, for seriousness is a dread of the unpredictable outcome of open possibility. To be serious is to press for a specified conclusion. To be playful is to allow for possibility whatever the cost to oneself.’

So let’s begin, as is our custom, by lighting our chalice candle as a symbol of our free religious faith. *If you’re at home do please light a candle with me if you would like to.*

‘May this light be an invitation into playfulness, a call to embrace all that’s possible, a sign of our willingness to remain open to whatever happens.’ Amen.

As today is also Lammas, which is the celebration of the first harvest of corn, and of the first loaf of bread of the new season, let’s sing our first hymn, 271 in green books “Give thanks for the corn’

HYMN 271 (G) Give thanks

Give thanks for the corn and the wheat that are reaped,
for labour well done and the barns that are heaped,
for the sun and the dew and the sweet honeycomb,
for the rose and the song and the harvest brought home.

Give thanks for the commerce and wealth of our land,
for cunning and strength of the hard-working hand,
for the beauty our artists and poets have wrought,
for the hope and affection our friendships have brought.

Give thanks for the homes that with kindness are blessed,
for seasons of plenty and well-deserved rest,
for our country extending from sea unto sea,
for the ways that have made it a land for the free.

English traditional melody, author unknown.

PRAYER

God of all blessings,
source of all life,
giver of all grace:

We thank you for the gift of life:
for the breath that sustains it,
for the food of the earth that nurtures it,
for the love of family and friends, which nourish it.

We thank you for the mystery of creation:
for the beauty that the eye can see,
for the joy that the ear may hear,
for the unknown that we cannot behold filling the universe with wonder,
for the expanse of space that draws us beyond our definitions of our selves.

We thank you for this day:
for life and one more day to love,
for opportunity and one more day to work for justice and peace,
for neighbours and one more person to love and be loved by,

for your grace and one more experience of your presence,
for your promise: to be with us, throughout all of our days.

For these, and all blessings, we give thanks.

Amen

And let's take a moment to bring in to our mind's eye anyone known to us who may be feeling lost and alone, in pain at this time...May they find solace and comfort.

And may our compassion and concern extend outwards to those unknown to us, wherever they may be...May all people, and all beings, find peace in their hearts and daily bread to sustain them.

Blessed be.

I wanted to find a story that combined playfulness and bread. And I found one!

STORY Mullah Nasruddin and the bread

The Mullah's wife sent him to buy some bread. When the Mullah arrived at the bread shop he saw a long queue of people waiting to buy bread. He wasn't best pleased, and thought he would do something to get himself in front of the line.

So he shouted out, "People, don't you know that the Sultan's daughter is getting married tonight and he's giving away free bread?" The multitude immediately ran off toward the palace, as the Sultan was known always to be generous to a fault and loved his daughter more than anyone.

The Mullah was now at the front of the queue, feeling very pleased with himself, and was about to buy his bread when he suddenly had a thought, "Mullah," he said to himself. "You are truly a fool. All the citizens are getting free bread tonight and I am about to pay for it!"

So he too ran off towards the palace. And when he got there he was thoroughly beaten by all the very disappointed people, and what's more he had no bread to take home to his wife.

READING by poet and essayist Diane Ackerman

Deep play is a fascinating hallmark of being human; it reveals our need to seek a special brand of transcendence, with a passion that makes thrill-seeking explicable, creativity possible, and religion inevitable.

Perhaps religion seems an unlikely example of playing, but if you look at religious rites and festivals, you'll see all the play elements, and also how deep that play can become.

Religious rituals usually include dance, worship, music, and decoration. They swallow time. They are ecstatic, absorbing, rejuvenating. The word "prayer" derives from the Latin *precarius*, and contains the idea of uncertainty and risk. Will the entreaty be answered?

Life or death may depend on the outcome.

RITUAL So...let us try a little playful religious ritual ourselves. This is a simple prayer - with actions, if you're willing. You can do these actions sitting down. All you need for this ritual is to be able to breathe in and out - fingers crossed on that - and to raise your arms as little or as high as you choose as, and lower them again, when I do.

And the words are by Alice Anacheka-Nasemann

So let's make ourselves comfortable, perhaps with our feet on the floor, sitting upright, and begin by simply taking a couple of deep breaths together as we hold our hearts open. And now...

Breathing in, [breathe in and raise arms] our hearts fill with compassion

Breathing out, we pray for healing in our world and in our lives.

Breathing in, we open ourselves to the transforming power of love

Breathing out, we pray for peace in our world and in our lives.

Breathing in, we hold hope in our hearts

Breathing out, we pray for justice in our world and in our lives.

Breathing in, we are the prayer

Breathing out, we are the healing

Breathing in, we are the love
Breathing out, we are the peace
Breathing in, we are the hope
Breathing out, we are the justice

May we know our strength
May we be filled with courage
May our love flow from us into this world.

May it be so.

Let's take a minute in silence followed by music

INTERLUDE Bach Prelude No 1

ADDRESS

The Sufi teacher, Mullah Nasrudin is a crafty and mischievous character, isn't he? He thinks nothing of playing tricks on others. But then it's always for a greater purpose, to teach important lessons, and very often the joke is on him anyway, as it was in our story this morning. There is undoubtedly a playfulness to all the Nasrudin stories, always an unexpected twist, and someone – quite often the Mullah himself – ends up with egg on their face. The stories are kind of silly and ridiculous, and yet also profound. So in this story we are able to observe the group-think of the 'multitude' in the bread line, their impatience, their greediness, and their gullibility. And their desperation not to miss out on an easy bargain makes us laugh, not least because we can probably see something of ourselves, something in our own readiness to believe there might be something better, cheaper, or faster on offer somewhere else. But remember this is a spiritual story, so Nasrudin is probably teasing all of us who crave quick answers to deep questions and shortcuts to enlightenment. Perhaps he's trying to teach those of us who lack the patience to wait, or the discipline to practise, or the wisdom to realize there is nothing better 'over there' – that it's all an illusion anyway?

I know you will draw from the story whatever meaning resonates for you. And whatever that is, it will be more palatable to hear. Because our teacher – the Mullah himself - turns out to be just as daft as we are! Even more so... because he even fell for his own story! And so we

see that this playfulness, teasing and trickery is an effective teaching tool, in the right hands, and we all get to share in the joke of what it means to be human and flawed.

Diane Ackerman invokes a more serious kind idea of playfulness, what she calls 'deep play'. She reminds us of some of the religious rituals we might be familiar with: the dressing up, intoning, chanting, lighting candles, creating all kinds of drama and theatre, which is a kind of a game, one which we might easily dismiss as hocus pocus, all smoke and mirrors.

And yet this kind of deep play can lift us out of the ordinary into the extraordinary. It invites us to enter a world of atmosphere and suspense, thrills and transcendence through what is – effectively – playacting. And we know it's a charade in a sense, but nevertheless it can capture our imagination – just as the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic in Boscastle did for me last week.

Ritual can be ecstatic. It can also be scary, even dangerous, in the wrong hands. It has the capacity to draw us in to altered and heightened states in which we may feel out of control in ways that are good or bad. But there's no denying that this form of play can be immensely powerful.

We don't do much ritual here. Candle lighting, of course. And the kind of simple prayer ritual we tried earlier, for example. And in a way worship itself is a ritual – we come each week to enter into a space, real or virtual, in which there are rules – unwritten but present nonetheless – where we know we will follow certain patterns together of listening, singing, story, prayer. It's ritual-lite, perhaps, I don't get to wear a robes or a hat, more's the pity, but it's still ritual. [Actually I do have a hat...] In fact the more overt rituals we stage – flower communion, harvest festival, carol service...these turn out to be some of our most popular services. So it seems many of us are, in fact, happy to suspend disbelief and enter into this kind of deep play – an enchanted time.

The rules of the game paradoxically free us up. They hold us, and link us through time. They evoke deep time and deep memory, in which the form is known across the ages and yet the space we enter opens up the possibility of magic, of wonder, of the transcendent *right now*. It's a safe space where nevertheless we don't know quite what will happen but we anticipate that the sharing of flowers, or the gratitude for food, or the singing of an angelic choir just might transport us out of ourselves and into connection with the divine.

James Carse said: *'To be playful is not to be trivial or frivolous, or to act as though nothing of consequence will happen. On the contrary, when we are playful with each other we relate as free persons, and the relationship is open to surprise; everything that happens is of consequence.'*

So to be playful is to take a risk. It is to disrupt the status quo. Who knows what will happen when we try something new, push our usual boundaries, wear a hat? It's how we learn, by trial and error, and we know we often learn more from our mistakes than our successes.

It's in our DNA to be playful, after all it's pretty much all we do when we're very young. But to keep that spirit of playfulness as we grow older requires our watchfulness. Not to allow ourselves to sink into cynicism and defeatism, into the habitual and the dull, but rather to keep on opening ourselves up, again and again, not to what's already known but to what's yet to be discovered...the frontiers of our consciousness. That's how we keep young at heart, and also how we become wise in mind. And that's what we're surely called to – into curiosity about this life, this world, this universe, God.

Yesterday I took part in a Zoom worship on blended (or hybrid, or multi-platform) worship. We're all still trying to work out to call this thing we're doing, and how to do it – which is all a kind of playfulness. Plenty of trial and error. The workshop was good, and I got some new ideas. We had some time for questions at the end, and Louise, one of the organizers, said, 'My question is why did we have to wait for a pandemic to do all this? Why weren't we doing it already? And, more to the point,' [she went on] 'how can we work out what we really want *now* without having to wait for the next pandemic before we get on with it?'

It's a good question – a playful question. One that shifts us out of ourselves and disrupts our usual way of thinking, in a helpful way. I'm going to leave that question with you...along with one more...how can *you* build a little more playfulness into your own life and into your own spiritual journey?

Blessed be.

2nd HYMN: 88 (P) Let it be a dance we do

[Chorus] Let it be a dance we do.

May I have this dance with you?

*Through the good times and bad times, too,
let it be a dance.*

Let a dancing song be heard.
Play the music, say the words,
and fill the sky with sailing birds.
Let it be a dance.
Let it be a dance.
Let it be a dance.

Learn to follow, learn to lead,
feel the rhythm, fill the need
to reap the harvest,
plant the seed.
Let it be a dance.

Chorus

Everybody turn and spin,
Let your body learn to bend,
and like a willow in the wind,
Let it be a dance.
Let it be a dance.
Let it be a dance.

A child is born, the old must die,
a time for joy, a time to cry,
take it as it passes by.
Let it be a dance.

Chorus

Morning star comes out at night,
without the dark there is no light,
if nothing's wrong then nothing's right,
Let it be a dance.
Let it be a dance.
Let it be a dance.

Let the sun shine, let it rain,
share the laughter, bear the pain,
and round and round we go again.
Let it be a dance.

Words and music by Ric Masten

CLOSING WORDS Rules of the Game, Rev. Scott Tayler

Kick the ball.

Dance in the rain.

Get lost on purpose.

Play fetch with the dog.

Fly the kite.

Smell the flowers.

Jump in the puddle.

Pull out the paints.

Throw the dice.

Learn the two-step.

Let life take you by the hand.

Lean back and let the wind mess up your hair.

Laugh. Live. Live!

Extinguish chalice

CLOSING MUSIC Joy comes back, Ruth Foster

<https://youtu.be/ZXp4BfMtQ-c>