

<i>Date Preached</i>	19-Sept-2021	<i>Date Initiated</i>	07-Sept-2021
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Prop 20, Yr B

" 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name ↓ welcomes me' "



This morning, I intend to preach on our Gospel reading, but the stereotyped images of the "capable wife" we heard in the Book of Proverbs demand, I think, something of a preface. We must always remember that the domestic ... and often submissive ... depiction of women in most of Holy Scripture is a cultural artifact: The Ancient Near East saw no role for a married woman in society other than as mistress of her husband's household. Despite this, however, notice that Proverbs' "woman of worth," as another translation names her, is also admired as an enterprising businessperson and generous philanthropist; as one who is strong of character, independent of action and wise of teaching. And above all, she is faithful: a woman who "fears" (that is, worships) the Lord. While this reading rehearses many tenacious and false tropes of female domesticity and subservience, it *also* subtly transcends them.

Words of wisdom anchored in a two-thousand-year-old view about women may—and *should*—set our teeth on edge, but also hear in today's reading glimpses of a vision of "a woman of worth" who is every bit as equal, independent and effective as any man, then or now. For in *this*, we find wisdom, indeed.

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And now, on to St Mark.

If we take that image of a "capable wife" from Proverbs and place it alongside both our psalm and our reading from St James, what emerges is a fairly tidy, conventional depiction of faith. The meta-message, if you will, of these three passages telegraphs *orderliness*: The hallmarks of exemplary faith are industry ... goodness ... virtue ... obedience ... endurance ... and prosperity, leavened by demeanor that is peaceful, gentle and submissive. I reflect on these passages and cannot help but think about the Puritans: those sober-sided English reformers who saw living in a principled, practical and prosperous way as a demonstration of inner godliness ... as re-assurance of one's own salvation.¹ And this Puritan work ethic² is deeply engrained in American culture ... and American Christianity ... in ways it is virtually impossible to overemphasize. Industry, self-sufficiency, temperance of appetites and strict personal morality were major themes, for example, of the evangelical renewal in this country during the twentieth century.

¹ *I.e.*, via the doctrine of predestination, which did (does) not countenance universal salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

² Also (and more widely) known as the Protestant work ethic, but "Puritan" more precisely names the Calvinist streaks that underlie this world view—streaks that not all Protestants give equal weight to ... if, indeed, they share them at all.

Now, don't get me wrong: Living with moral integrity and contributing to society *are* important aspects of Christian faith. But they are not the last word on the matter ... for when we turn to the words Jesus says this morning, He *goes in an entirely opposite direction*. His disciples have been arguing about how God measures Christian greatness.³ Their insecure bickering indicates, I think, a desire for some sort of divine checklist of Christian virtues: an insider's guide—"Ten Secrets to Heavenly Success Every Christian Must Know!"

But Jesus deftly parries the entire premise of their argument. Greatness—who is the *best* ... or the *most* ... or the *highest*—is not Jesus' measuring stick. In our so-responsible ... *very adult* ... lives, we make plans, achieve outcomes and take pride in what we've accomplished. We strive and compete; we receive status and win recognition. But Jesus turns this all on its head, as He takes a little child in His arms as the model for true faith. A child knows nothing of greatness ... but is simple ... guileless ... inquisitive ... eager ... energetic ... adaptable ... teachable ... impressionable ... joyful ... innocent. A child makes her needs known, but when they've been satisfied, she does not pile up more, merely for the sake of having it or as a hedge against the future. A child lacks any pre-set agenda or prejudice. A child seeks love ... but not glory. This, says Jesus, *this* is the image of faith we must follow. A faith that is heartfelt and exuberant; a faith that can pretend and imagine and improvise; a faith that doesn't keep score or get all hung up on interpreting the rules, but that runs and climbs and laughs, all for the very *joy* of it. In short, a faith that *plays* ... that plays like a child.

And what holds for us individually also hold for us collectively, as God's family, the Church. Being a faithful parish should *look like play*. Let's call it *godly play*.⁴

- A playful parish serves at a soup kitchen in Torrington and makes thousands of colorful hard-boiled eggs for homeless people on Valentine's Day—not only to feed people, but also to hug them.
- A child-like parish revels in making and hearing beautiful music ... because in it, we feel the gentle tickle of God.
- A joyful parish rakes leaves on Fall Clean-up Day and climbs too-tall ladders to veil the Cross at Lent. It schleps furniture at the Tag Sale, decorates for the Bazaar and ties Christmas trees to car roofs ... all the while playing 'follow the leader' with the Holy Spirit.
- The child-church Jesus calls us to be is potluck suppers ... and Shrove Tuesday pancakes ... and Veterans' Day luncheons.
- A parish that loves like a child brings a flower to those who are homebound ... offers a ride to those who cannot drive ... and visits or sends a card to those who are lonely or grieving.
- And is any parish *ever* more playful than in the joy, the companionship and the laughter of coffee hour?!

So much more than meetings and budgets and reports, *these* are the activities of a truly faithful parish because through all this play, we both know and serve God: We let down our too-

³ I use this turn-of-phrase only rhetorically. I do not believe that God does any such thing, and, I think, Jesus basically says as much in His answer, as well.

⁴ I am deliberately referencing, here, a wonderful church school curriculum that uses play, experience and storytelling as a way to see and know the presence of God in our lives—to nurture and develop our own spirituality.

adult guard ... set aside whatever our roles we have 'out there' ... and we love and we praise; we imagine and we help; we giggle and we teach; we run and we comfort. We imitate Jesus with abandon, just as a child might imitate an airplane or a kangaroo.

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And so, that's my invitation—well, it's actually *Jesus'* invitation—to you, this Welcome Home Sunday: Come and *play* at St Andrew's like it's God's big playground.

- Come play in our various ministries and missions, as we show kindness and care to others.
- Come play in our study groups and commissions, as we imagine ideas and dream dreams you've never thought of.
- Come play in our fellowship times as 'recess' from the normal grind of life, as we renew and refresh one another.
- And come play in our worship, as we're held in the fold of God's arms; as we sit on Jesus' shoulders and see things from *His* perspective.

The only limits on our parish-as-playground are our own energy, creativity and vision. Like children in a field on a sunny afternoon, we can make up whatever games we want to play ... we can imagine any world we want to live in ... we can invite as many people to play as we want. And when we do ... when we welcome each other—and all—as children in Christ's name ... Jesus will surely beam the ear-to-ear smile of every parent Who delights in seeing His kids at joyful, boisterous, wonderful play.



*The Rev Douglas S Worthington
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Blessing

May your play be of faith and your faith be of play;
May your smile be as bright as the Man in the Moon's;
May your kindness be as free as chasing after puppies;
May your patience be as long as sweet dreams;
May your love be as deep as the fragrance of lilac; and
The blessing ...