

# PLAY: IS IT WASTE OR WORSHIP?

GOD IN MY EVERYTHING. KEN SHIGEMATSU. 2013 NOVEMBER 24.



ECCLESIASTES 3:4

.....

Thanks, Jonathan and Worship Team.

Thank you, Lydia and Kahlil, for sharing your lives and being part of Life Together.

Gail mentioned the Christmas concert.

This past week, I was making my way to our house after work at around 5:00; it was kind of dark. Someone was walking by our home with their dog and said, "Hi, Ken!" This person happened to be one of our neighbours. We chatted for a little while, and as we were about to part to go into our own homes, this person said, "Hey, by the way, are you guys having a Christmas concert this year?"

I had invited this neighbour to a previous concert; I didn't think this person would come, but I thought, "Ah, what the heck! I'll invite them!" So I invited them, and they liked it so much that this neighbour brought their family to the Christmas Eve service and wants to come again this year.

As Gail mentioned, we really design these concerts for our friends and family members who don't know Christ.

I recently wrote this book on spiritual rhythms, and some of my friends and acquaintances who aren't Christians have approached me when we've been in proximity. They say, "I hear that you wrote a book." I'm like, "Yeah, it's a book on spiritual rhythms. It's a Christian-based book." Because they're not Christians, I've tended to hesitate for a moment before I tell them, "If you're interested at all, I'd be glad to gift you with a copy." And a couple of really sophisticated and successful (in a worldly sense) friends have said, "You know, I've been wanting to go on a spiritual journey, so I'd love a copy."

I think some of our friends are more spiritually hungry than we may be aware, and so please invite them out to the concert.

Speaking of Christmas and the book, next Sunday I'll be doing a Christmas book-signing. If you'd like to pick up copies for your friends, you're welcome to. If you're here and would like a copy of the book and the only you reason you haven't picked one up is because things are financially tight, next Sunday I would love to gift you with a copy – please see me after the service next Sunday.

Speaking of Christmas gifts, we have some good news! The Board of Elders met this past week, on Thursday, and I asked the Board: When we take the benevolent offering for the Philippines next Sunday, could we, as a church, draw from our reserves to match the offering, which in turn the government will match? And so if we give \$10,000 for the Philippines next Sunday, Tenth Church will match that gift from our reserves (our savings), and then the government will match it further: \$10,000 would become \$40,000. We love the Philippines and we want to do a small part in helping them rebuild through our prayers and our giving.

---

I was recently speaking at a conference. I was on a panel, and someone in the audience asked, "What prevents people from growing spiritually?" I paused for a moment, then said, "This might be a somewhat subjective answer, but as I look into my own heart and at people around me, I think one of the things that prevents us from growing

.....

spiritually is this feeling that we need to achieve something externally, that we need to accomplish something significant.” Speaking as an Asian, I think this is true of a lot of Asians, but it’s not just Asians who feel this way.

If you think about it, a large portion of our energies across our lifetime has gone into positioning ourselves so that we are more advantaged. When we are students, we want to get good grades so that we can get into the right schools. If we’re in the work world, we are building our résumés so that we can get the right job. We go to the right gyms and the right salons to achieve the right looks so that we can attract the right partner. If we become parents, like Lydia and Kahlil, there’s a part of us that wants to give our child every advantage from the time they are in the crib, whether it’s Baby Einstein DVDs, the right violin teacher – and on and on.

Our headlong pursuit of achievement can undermine our relationship with God, and one of the practices that can restore our soul is play. Because when we truly play, we take ourselves less seriously and become more receptive to God.

Having said that, let me also say this: I’ve been reading this fascinating book called *The Lonely Man of Faith* by the brilliant Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. In this book, Soloveitchik points out – correctly – that if you look at Genesis, there seems to be two different portrayals of Adam, the first human being in the creation poem.

Adam #1 corresponds to Genesis 1. Adam #1, according to Genesis 1:28, is passionate about filling the earth and subduing it. Adam #1 feels compelled to conquer, create and control. Adam #1 wants to understand how nature works so that he can conquer disease, create businesses, control his environment. Soloveitchik points out that each of us has an Adam #1 inside of us. Adam #1 is not necessarily bad; Adam #1 is necessary for our world.

Soloveitchik points out that in Genesis there is also Adam #2, who seems to have a different persona. Adam #2 corresponds to Genesis 2. Adam #2 is a person who is brought into a garden and called to humbly serve it. Adam #2 is a person who walks through that garden in the cool of the day, communing with his creator, God. While Adam #1 is interested in the question, “How does nature work?” so that he can control nature, Adam #2 is interested in the question, “Why is there a nature in the first place?” Adam #2 is much more interested in relationship and spiritual connection. Each of us has an Adam #2 inside us.

Here in Vancouver, there are strong manifestations of Adam #1: people that are very work-oriented and productive, very success-oriented. In Vancouver, we also have strong manifestations of Adam #2: people who are relational and want a spiritual connection.

With which Adam do you identify more?

Soloveitchik wrote *The Lonely Man of Faith* nearly 50 years ago, back in 1965, and he said that Adam #1, the Adam that wants to be productive and successful, is utterly overshadowing Adam #2, who wants to be relational and spiritual. If that was true 50 years ago, how much truer is it today?

Part of the way that we can cultivate Adam #2 is through real play. Because when we’re truly engaged in play, we don’t do things just because of some utilitarian result that we’re hoping for. Play, by definition, is doing something for its own sake. Playing is doing something for its own sake. When we play, we experience all kinds of benefits for our body, our mind and our soul – but we don’t play for these reasons; we play for its own sake.

Play is less like a business lunch, where the real purpose of the lunch is something beyond the food; it’s to get through an agenda. Play is more like a meal with a special friend, where you just want to hang out and savour the person’s presence and the food.

We read in Ecclesiastes 3:4 that God ordains times for play; we read that there is “a time to weep and a time to

laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.”<sup>‡</sup> In Zechariah 8:5, the Lord promised Israel that when he returned to Jerusalem, a sign of that blessing would be that “[t]he city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there.”

Let's pray together.

Living God,

We ask that through the wisdom of your Word and the illumination of your Holy Spirit, we would understand how true play can be a form of worship.

We pray that we would understand how because of our friendship with Jesus Christ, we can play with more freedom than we would otherwise be able to.

It's in Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

We're in this series called *God in My Everything*. We've been looking at different practices that enable busy people to experience support in their friendship with God, and we've used the image of a trellis throughout this series. A trellis supports a grapevine; these practices, likewise, support our friendship with God.

Today, as we've mentioned, we're going to be looking at the practice of play. In this message, I want to explore how play can be a window into God – even an avenue of worship. I also want to look at a possible danger of play. Then I want to explore how knowing Jesus Christ can make us the freest “players” of all, if I can put it that way.

First let me just review that play, as I'm defining it, is doing something for its own sake. It's doing something for its own sake.

When I was in high school, I enjoyed playing basketball, and some of the best times of play involved spontaneous pickup games. But there were times when I would quote-unquote *play* basketball for our school team, and I would be preoccupied with whether I was starting or not, whether I was getting enough playing time or not; pre-occupied with my stats; fuming over a bad play or a bad call; pre-occupied with impressing a girl! I seemed to be playing, but many times I wasn't playing. Playing is when we do something for its own sake; I was using basketball to achieve other goals, at the very least sub-consciously if not consciously.

So it is with us: When we are doing something – whether it's in sports or music or art or something else – where our real goal is not to simply enjoy the activity but to achieve something through it, we're not really playing. The same is true when we put our kids, if we're parents, in some kind of activity, some kind of sport or music or art, and we're thinking, “Hmm, this would be a great way for our kid to get a scholarship to UBC!” or our attitude is, “We've got to win at all costs!” That's not really play. Play is to do something for its own sake and for the joy and delight of whatever it is that that activity brings us.

Let me give an example. Our son, Joey, is five years old – I think the same age as Zion. [*Conversing with Lydia and Kahlil:*] Is Zion around five or something like that? ... He's four. He's turning five though, is that right? ... February. Okay. Four turning five, at some point. All right. Smart guy!

Joey enrolled in kindergarten in September, and not long ago, my wife and I were going to our first parent-teacher meeting. He goes to General Wolfe, which is our catchment school; it's between here and Queen Elizabeth Park on Ontario Street. We're walking to the school, and my wife astutely anticipates that there is a small possibility that

---

<sup>‡</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, *New International Version*<sup>®</sup>, NIV<sup>®</sup>.

Joey could be outside; if so, he might notice us and we might distract him, and so we try to keep a relatively low profile as we're walking to the school. Sure enough, as we're going down the sidewalk and come along General Wolfe Elementary School to our right, we see Joey outside with all of his classmates. They're lined up in yellow bibs, getting ready to go to the library; they're outside the school. We try not to get his attention at all, but as we're walking a little closer, we notice that Joey turns his head this way towards us. Thankfully he doesn't see us, but he sees the playground! Of course, he breaks out from the line; he jumps up, grabs this red metal pole, and he starts swinging back and forth like Tarzan! He's got this grin on his face; his eyes are sparkling; he's having a great time. His teacher, of course, says, "Joey, get back in the line! Joey, get back in the line!" – which, thankfully, he does!

My wife and I used to wonder why, at preschool and kindergarten, Joey has had instant name recognition. We now know why! It's because the teachers are always saying, "No, Joey, no! No, Joey, no!" He should have been in the line-up, but he was experiencing a lot of joy swinging on that red pole – and *we* experienced delight in *his* delight.

So it is when you are experiencing real joy in a way that is, obviously, not harming you or someone else: God delights in your delight. Therefore, you could say that true play is a form of worship because true play brings joy to God's heart as God delights in your delight. When we're engaged in play and we are exposed to things that cause our hearts to leap, we're engaged in a kind of worship.

Some of these days this fall, like today, have been beautiful. Monday is my day off, and from time to time, on a Monday, my wife and I would take our golden retriever, who's one and a half years old, to the University Endowment Lands for a walk or a run through the trails there. (If you're new to Vancouver and you have a dog, the Endowment Land trails are the closest thing I know to doggie heaven – they love those trails!) On one especially sunny day, we could see the sunbeams just streaming through the treetops, and it was just mesmerizing; my heart just leapt in gratitude and in worship!

There is something about playing and being exposed to beauty that can not only cause God to delight in our delight but also cause *us* to delight in and worship our Maker.

The Oxford scholar C. S. Lewis writes, in *The Problem of Pain*, about how we can be standing before a landscape, a beautiful vista – and there is something in our heart that aches for a vista that we've never seen. Lewis writes about being in a boat on a beautiful day and hearing the clap-clap-clap of the water against the side of the boat and, just for a moment, longing for that certain something that we are certain we were made for.

Lewis writes about "tantalising glimpses, promises [whispered but] never quite fulfilled"; beautiful music whose "echoes ... died away just as they caught your ear."

He goes on: "We cannot tell each other about it. It is the secret signature of each soul, the incommunicable and unappeasable want, the thing we desired before we met our wives or made our friends or chose our work, and which we shall still desire on our deathbeds."

There is something about play and being exposed to beauty that awakens our heart to the *eternal* beauty into which we will one day enter if we know Christ; if our lives are joined to his life.

Let me ask you: Is there something that you can pursue that makes your heart go, "Wow!"? Is there something you can do for which there is no utilitarian result other than the fact that you feel more alive, more connected to yourself and to God and those whom you love – something that really nourishes you?

Ecclesiastes reminds us that there is a time to play. Play can be a pathway to God; it can be a form of worship. But play can also lead us away from God and not toward God.

This past summer, in one of my messages, I quoted a study cited by Dr. Kelly McGonigal, a psychologist who teaches at Stanford. I'm going to cite this study again since many of you were away in the summer and because it really fits this message.

Dr. McGonigal points out, citing a study done by the American Psychological Association (APA), that our brains tend to mis-predict what will really lift us up and what will really let us down. There are activities that we anticipate will lift us up, but they don't really end up lifting us up; instead, they bring us down. On the other hand, there are other activities that we anticipate will not really lift us up, but they end up actually lifting us up. What are these?

The APA study points out that the activities of gambling, drinking, shopping, playing videogames, surfing the Internet and watching TV or movies for more than two hours are activities that we may think will lift us up – and they momentarily do, but they tend to bring us down in the long run in terms of wellbeing. We tend to *overestimate* the ability of these activities to lift us up.

Then there are other activities whose capacities to lift us up and enhance our wellbeing we tend to *underestimate*: playing sports, playing or listening to music, spending time with friends and family, praying or attending a worship service, going outside for a walk, getting a massage, meditating, doing yoga and spending time in a creative hobby.

For those of you who are more medically oriented, it's interesting that there is physiological correlation here that you can track as well. When you're involved in an activity like drinking, gambling or playing certain kinds of videogames, you're anticipating that you're going to get a lift from these things – and you momentarily do: You get a shot of dopamine to your brain, but that shot doesn't last for particularly long, and afterwards you start to feel like you're descending – you feel worse than before. Whereas you go and spend some time with friends, you go for a walk, you do some gardening – those don't sound very exciting, and you think, "Yeah, that's not really going to lift me up that much." Yet when we do these activities, our brain releases the mood-enhancing chemicals serotonin and oxytocin. There's a physiological correlation as well as a spiritual one here.

Ignatius of Loyola is a spiritual theologian whom I love to cite, and he talks about something similar, directing you to pursue those activities that cause you to feel the most gratitude, joy and connection to God over time and to be wary of those activities that create a sense of frustration and anger in you and cause you to feel disconnected from God and yourself.

This may sound rather obvious, but Loyola also points out that there are certain activities that can trick us because they *initially* bring a sense of lift but *eventually* bring us down. So Loyola says that when you consider something, examine the head of the snake (the experience), the body of the snake and also the tail of the snake. You may experience a momentary lift with the head or the body of the experience, but how are you feeling in terms of the *end* of that experience, the tail of the snake? Loyola would direct you to pursue those activities where you feel an enduring sense of joy, wellness and connection to God.

Loyola's own illustration, I think, is a great one. In the sixteenth century, he was seeking glory in battle as a Spanish soldier. He's running headlong toward the enemy and he gets his leg literally blown off by a cannonball, and so he's taken away on a stretcher; he's convalescing. There's not much to do while he's recovering – no iPads in the sixteenth century, no TV. He just has a couple of books that he has access to: One is a romantic novel; the other is a biography of Jesus. He reads them both. As he reads the romantic novel, he envisions pursuing a certain woman of the court there in Spain, and he's excited about that. As he reads about the biography of Jesus, he envisions himself going on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and he feels excited about that, too. But then he looks inside

his heart and in his soul. He's got a lot of time to think and feel as he's lying in his recovery bed, and he observes that the excitement around pursuing this particular woman spikes momentarily – but then he just feels restless and anxious. On the other hand, when he envisions pursuing Christ on this pilgrimage, the joy is enduring and tends to grow.

As Loyola would say, pursue those things – play or otherwise – that cause you to rise toward God and lead you to other people in love, as in Life Together; pursue *these* forms of play.

I know a woman named Lisa. She is a trainer for elite, NCAA Division 1 athletes in the United States. She's a committed Christian, and once in a while, the subject of faith will come up with the athletes whom she's training. Many of these athletes will respond by saying something like this: “When I was younger, my family and I did go to church. But then I made it into a travelling soccer team” – or softball team or basketball team – “and from that time forward, we just stopped going to church. I lost my connection to God.” They say this wistfully.

Jade Holownia, in his great message here on family as part of this sermon series, asked the question: What is at the centre of our lives? What is our true anchor? And I love sports – sports are great. Music is great. Art is great. But we have to ask ourselves: As we pursue these hobbies, are they gifts that draw us to God, or do they take the place of God? Jade perceptively observed that there are some people who say, “Well, I don't want to be legalistic about my involvement in church.” Yes, that's fair enough. But he also observes that people can be legalistic about their involvement in sports: “I can't miss a practice. I can't miss a game.” Jade raised a really good question. Sometimes we need to make hard choices.

Brené Brown has given a great TED talk on shame and connection. How many of you have seen Brené's TED talk? It's a wonderful talk. TED.com – there are some great lectures on that website, as you may know.

In her book *The Gifts of Imperfection*, Brené writes:

[My husband] Steve and I sat down in 2008 and made a practical list of the things that make our family work. We basically answered the question, “When things are going really well in our family, what does it look like?” The answers included sleep, working out, healthy food, cooking, time off, weekends away, going to church, being present with the kids, a sense of control over our money, meaningful work that doesn't consume us, time to piddle, time with family and close friends, and time to just hang out. These were (and are) our “ingredients for joy and meaning.”

“Sounds awfully similar to a rule of life,” I was thinking!

Brené continues:

Then we looked at the dream list that we started making a couple of years ago.... Everything on this list was either an accomplishment or an acquisition – a house with more bedrooms, a trip here.... Everything required that we make more money and spend more money.

When we compared our dream list to our “joy and meaning” list, we realized that by merely letting go of the list of things we want to accomplish and acquire, we would actually be living our dream – not striving to make it happen in the future, but living it right now. ...

Embracing our “joy and meaning” list has not been easy. There are days when it makes perfect sense, and then there are days when I get sucked into believing how much better everything would feel if we just had a really great guest room or a better kitchen, or if I got to speak here or write an article for that popular magazine.

Even [my daughter] Ellen has had to make some changes. Last year, we told her that we were going to limit her extracurricular activities and that she would have to make choices between multiple sports and Girl Scouts and after-school activities. At first there was some resistance. She pointed out that she did fewer things than most of her friends. This was true. She has many friends who are in two or three sports every semester and take music lessons and language lessons and art classes. These kids wake up at 6 a.m. and go to bed at 10 p.m.

We explained that the “cutting down” was part of a larger family plan. I had decided to go part-time at the university, and her dad was going to go to a four-day workweek. She looked at us as if she were bracing for bad news. She asked, “Is anything wrong?”

We explained that we wanted more downtime. More time to hang out and take it easy. After we swore that we weren't sick, she got excited and asked, “Are we making more time for TV?”

I explained, “No. Just more family play time. Your dad and I love our work, but it can be very demanding. I travel and have writing deadlines; your dad has to be on call. You also work hard at your schoolwork. We want to make sure that we schedule in downtime for all of us.”

While this experience may sound great, it was terrifying for me as a parent. What if I'm wrong? What if busy and exhausted is what it takes? What if she doesn't get to go to the college of her choice because she doesn't play the violin and speak Mandarin and French and she doesn't play six sports?

What if we're normal and quiet and happy? Does that count?

I guess the answer to this question is only *yes* if it counts to us. If what matters to us is what we're concerned about, then play and rest is important. If what matters to us is what other people think or say or value, then it's back to exhaustion and producing for self-worth.

Today, I choose play and rest.

If, like Brené, we know Jesus Christ, we can really play and we can really rest. You know why? Because we know – if we know Christ – that Jesus Christ, on that first, big Christmas, came into the world as God in human flesh. He lived the perfect life that we were called to live. He died the death on a Roman cross that we deserve to die for our sins. He absorbed our sins and shame in his body so that we could be forgiven; so that we could be adopted as cherished daughters and sons of God. When we really understand that, we will know that we are enough and that we have nothing to prove.

Michael Jordan was considered one of the best basketball players of his era – one of the best, arguably, of all time. He was once asked the question by a reporter, “Why is it, Michael, that you have this uncanny ability, when the game is on the line and the clock is running out, to get the ball, go up and make that shot while there are so many other talented players in the NBA who choke and miss the shot when it counts?”

“Here's why,” Michael said. “When I was a freshman at the University of North Carolina, I was playing in a championship game against Georgetown.” Some of you probably saw this game. “At the end of the game, when we were behind, someone tossed me the ball. I happen to go up, took a jump-shot; it happened to go in – and that shot changed my life! We won the National Championship! And every time I go up at the last minute of the game to take a shot, I'm relaxed because, in the back of my mind, I say to myself, ‘I made the shot that won the National Championship! I'm a somebody! Who cares if I miss this shot?’ I relax, and I can focus, and I can more likely make that shot.”

Here it is: If you belong to Jesus Christ, you have made the shot. Perhaps more precisely, Jesus Christ has made the shot for you. You are “a somebody”: You are a cherished, beloved daughter or son of God. You have nothing to prove. You don’t need to compulsively try to stamp your existence upon the ghost of your existence because you are somebody: You are a daughter or son of the great King. When you really realize that deep in your heart, then you can play with nothing to prove; you can work with nothing to prove. What a gift! What a *freeing* gift it is to know Jesus Christ.

Throughout this series, we've been looking at this trellis, and everything here is connected. The Jesuits tells us that consolation, joy, play – they are all ultimately for mission. That’s because as we’re filled with joy and a sense of God’s life, we move out into the world and make the world a better, more just and more joyful place. We don't play *so that* we can engage in justice, but it's a natural consequence if we know Christ. These are all connected.

Throughout this series, we’ve talked about having a set of practices in our life: one simple practice that connects us to the God; another that nourishes us and makes us feel alive; but then a third practice that leads us out into people, in relationship or for justice.

And here’s the thing: It’s possible to not have play and to not have rest and to work for justice; to grit our teeth and to strive to be holy and to strive to know the truth. But if we do it without play and without rest, we will tend to become very serious, very driven, very Adam #1 with no Adam #2. On the other hand, if we do take time for rest and play, we can move out into the world and make it a more just place with the love, the wisdom and the winsomeness of Jesus Christ – and we can do it with joy.

In our work and in our play, in our rest and in our service, may we know God. May we know God in our everything.

Let's pray. Let's take a moment to pray.

I wonder if you do something that makes you come alive. If not, maybe pray that God would guide you into that, whatever it may be.

If you're doing something or could do something that may be good in and of itself but that might usurp the place of the ultimate life-giver, God himself; if the gift could take the place of the Giver of the gift, I pray that God would remain your centre, your joy, your hope, your delight – even as you are God's delight.

*[silence]*

And we pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

---

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Playing is doing something for its own sake.

- What prevents you from playing?
- How is playing a gift to God?
- What are some of the spiritual gifts of play?

## RECOMMENDED READING

Brown, Stuart. *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*. New York: Penguin, 2009.

Shigematsu, Ken. "Play Like a Child." *God in My Everything*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013.

---

## CITE THIS SERMON

APA Shigematsu, K. (2013, November 24). *Play: Is It Waste or Worship?* Transcript of sermon delivered at Tenth Church, Vancouver, BC. Retrieved [Month D, YYYY], from [URL]

CMS Shigematsu, Ken. "Play: Is It Waste or Worship?" Transcript of sermon delivered at Tenth Church, Vancouver, November 24, 2013. *Tenth.ca*, accessed [Month D, YYYY], [URL].

MLA Shigematsu, Ken. "Play: Is It Waste or Worship?" *God in My Everything* Sermon Series. Tenth Church. Vancouver. 24 Nov. 2013. *Tenth.ca*. Web. [D Mon. YYYY]. Transcript.

TURABIAN Shigematsu, Ken. "Play: Is It Waste or Worship?" (Transcript). Sermon, Tenth Church, Vancouver, November 24, 2013, [URL] (accessed [Month D, YYYY]).