

Steve Jungkeit
The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Psalm 137: 2-4, I Corinthians 1: 25

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If There When Grace Dances: Notes on Festivity and Play

Most summers over the past decade, our family has found a way to visit New Orleans, where I have put into practice Auden's admonition: if there when Grace dances, one must dance. But we didn't make it to New Orleans this year, and so instead, New Orleans came to Old Lyme. It makes an easier transition for me, and I hope and trust that there's something life giving about it all for you as well. But I wanted to address a lingering set of questions that might be out there: what does any of this have to do with church, really? What does music designed for streets and parties and parades have to do with matters of God, and the Spirit? What does it have to do with the weighty and substantive issues that probably need to be addressed? And shouldn't I be telling you what I did with myself this summer?

To the latter question, I can say that there's not much to tell. Most days, I simply read, for long stretches of time. I read Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and then a book about the history of neoliberal economics. I read Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and then some more recent novels from W.G. Sebald, Olga Tokarczuk, and Elena Ferrante. I wrote an essay about Middletown, Ohio, where, coincidentally, I shared the same high school teachers as J.D. Vance, and where I came to think about the world in a way that is, more or less, the polar opposite of the vice presidential nominee. I went on walks, hung out with family, and drove the kids to and from various places. None of that makes for an especially interesting story, but I wasn't unhappy. I've said in the past that with the right reading material I'd make a cheerful prisoner, and that adage held true this summer. I was a cheerful and contented fellow, with my coffee and my books.

As for the weighty and substantive matters, that'll come. For now, here in the late summer, as the gears of various institutional machineries are creaking back into motion, I wanted to think with you briefly about the importance of festivity and play, as exemplified this morning by our guests. Those two categories, festivity and play, are related to other crucial dimensions of our lives, among them imagination, fantasy, creativity, mysticism, and laughter. And so I'd like to spend just a few minutes today outlining the importance of those capacities for our humanity, and for our sanity. I'll touch on three dimensions of our lives where we are fortified and strengthened by those crucial activities, festivity and play: a theological dimension, a public (or a political) dimension, and a psychic dimension.

We'll start with theology. Harvey Cox is a theologian from Harvard who once upon a time visited Old Lyme, and who preached from this pulpit. He came to prominence in the 60's for a book called *The Secular City*, but the book I love most is called *The Feast of Fools*. In it, he demonstrates how the counterculture of the late 60's borrowed, knowingly or not, from earlier historical practices, especially a medieval celebration known as the Feast of Fools. It took place on New Year's Day, and was practiced widely from the 12th through the 16th centuries. During the feast, people donned masks, and the peasantry was permitted to satirize the clergy and the aristocracy. It was accompanied with music and dancing, along with copious amounts of food and drink. The practice was rooted in

Scripture: in Mary's Magnificat ("He has put down the mighty from their seat"); in Jesus's first sermon in Luke ("He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor"); and in Paul's letter to the Corinthians ("For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom"). It was a theological celebration of the lowly of the earth, but it did so by employing comedy, fantasy, and street pageantry.

With the advent of the Protestant Reformation something shifted. Suddenly there was a much higher premium paid on qualities like thrift, industry, and ambition, while things like play and festivity were criticized at best, and outright suppressed at worst. Something was gained, I suppose, in that Protestant shift, but much was lost as well. Among the greatest things that were lost was the sense that festivity and play had a cosmic significance, that these were activities that connected us to the great stories and myths of human striving. Sure, there's Halloween night and maybe New Year's Eve, and if you're fortunately placed there's Mardi Gras. But these are isolated events, and rarely do they have the effect of charging the rest of life with previously unimagined possibilities.

There are still places where that older sense of festivity prevails. If you head up I-91 to Glover, Vermont, Bread and Puppet (a troupe that, like Harvey Cox, has also visited us in Old Lyme) puts on huge pageants every Sunday afternoon with giant oversized puppets. Those pageants are attempts to shift the center of gravity for participants and onlookers alike, so that the world seems a little more magical, a little more laden with creative possibility. Every Sunday pageant is even consummated with a kind of sacramental feast, of homemade bread and a delicious aioli. Every time I've been there, I've walked away thinking, "I need more of this spirit in my own existence." To name another example, the Second Lines that take place most Sundays down in New Orleans exemplify that older kind of festivity as well, where the streets suddenly belong to the people, and where work and productivity yield to joyful music and dance. At its best, I take it that these are a kind of theological demonstration, where those who have historically been poor or otherwise marginalized can affirm their dignity and worth, while celebrating what it is to be alive on the planet at the same time.

So...festivity and play matter in a theological sense, demonstrating the great themes of Scripture while also affirming human worth. Our music this morning is a concrete manifestation of that spirit.

But there's a second significance to festivity and play, and that has to do with our public, collective lives, which is to say, our politics. Here I mean politics in the small "p" sense of the word, which simply has to do with how we organize ourselves together. Too often, I think, we are imaginatively starved. Of late, it's become difficult to imagine ways of living that don't involve fear and armaments, endless consumer acquisition and environmental waste. So too, we often lack the capacity to imaginatively inhabit worlds other than our own. Festivity helps to restore such capacities for dreams and visions. It keeps us in relationship with cultures in Latin America, Africa and Asia, but it also helps to get us in touch with that old Hebraic vision found in the book of Joel, where "young people shall see visions, and the old ones shall dream dreams." Festivity and play help to unlock those long repressed elements within our collective lives. Is it still possible to imagine a society where everyone is guaranteed housing and a basic wage not only as political rights but as human rights? Is it possible to imagine a country without firearms and the violence that goes with it? Can we still dream a place where, across the many differences of race, religion, and nationality, we find ways of celebrating our common humanity? In truth, I think we're seeing demonstrations of those dreams and visions in the experiments that many younger folks are undertaking around redefining what constitutes a family,

how intimacy is expressed, and fluid gender identities. Beyond that, go to any music festival, to say nothing of other kinds of festivals, and you'll see some approximation of various social and utopian dreams being enacted. That is a gift of festivity and play that our world desperately needs at the moment.

Finally, festivity and play have a basic human, or psychic, significance. Children know this instinctively, but as we age, we tend to forget the importance that laughter, play, and celebration have for our well-being. Here in North America, and especially in New England, we tend to privilege two activities above all - work and thought - while allowing our imaginative and celebrative capacities to atrophy. To those activities - work and thought - we have lately added measurement. Never in the history of the world has a culture measured so many steps, so many miles, so many calories, so many heartbeats, so many views, so many songs listened to. I sometimes wonder if we will soon enter a new Romantic moment, akin to the early 19th century, when people revolted against the straitjacket of rationalism and factory labor in favor of feeling, poetry, and nature. I've come to wonder if festivity will be the way that we free ourselves from the algorithms and the self-surveillance encouraged by Spotify and YouTube, Google and Apple. I've come to wonder if those parts of our souls that have atrophied under the weight of rationalism, productivity and algorithms can come alive again only under the tutelage of the Feast of Fools and its many offshoots.

That's a serious form of play that we've been pursuing around here at FCCOL for some now. I think of it as our contribution to a still imaginary field of inquiry called festivity studies, a field whose curriculum we are, even now, building. It's why some of us have traveled to New Orleans together, and to Cuernavaca, in Mexico, for the Day of the Dead. It is, in part, why we traveled to West Africa to witness the sacred traditions of vodun, and it's why some of us will be heading to Cuba in the spring of 2025, where we'll be moving between different rural and urban communities, attending to the ritual and festival lives that play out there. It's why we've had a lot of guest musicians and alternative liturgies of late, to introduce us to the festival lives of other cultures. And, of course, it's why Charlie and the Tropicales are here this morning. To all of you, we are blessed by your presence, and we are grateful to you for keeping open this sacred window into the festival and playful dimensions of human life.

I'll close with words found in Harvey Cox's book *The Feast of Fools*. "A sense of irrepressible, radical hope remains alive and well in the festival moment. Its Christ is the painted jester, whose foolishness is wiser than wisdom. Its church meets wherever people lift festive bowls to toast joys remembered or anticipated. Its liturgy is the exuberant enactment of fantasy before the eyes of a prosaic world. Its God is the often-unspoken ground for refusing to be cowed into timidity or resignation before mere facts. It may be the responsibility of people of faith to nourish this gift, to celebrate it. It could, after all, disappear. But where festivity has disappeared, hope and joy have disappeared as well. And there, humans have ceased to be human."

Let's do our part to keep such a spirit alive, in this place and wherever we go. If there when Grace dances...we must dance!