

**Message: “Joyful Play”**

**Kelly could barely contain her excitement as she helped her seven-year-old son Hudson get out of the car.** They were returning home from the grocery store a week before Christmas. There was a surprise waiting for them inside. You see, the trip to the store was an excuse to get Hudson out of the house. Kelly and her husband Alan wanted to surprise him with their first real Christmas tree.

**They carefully planned the day before.** Alan would sneak out to buy an evergreen and get it in its stand while Hudson and Kelly were out. The couple hoped the tree might get Hudson excited for Christmas and add a whole new level of holiday joy. But they could never be sure what might touch Hudson’s spirit.

**Most kids don’t need encouragement when it comes to Christmas.** But Hudson isn’t a typical child. He has autism. Hudson seems to float between two worlds, the one we live in and the one in his head. Looking forward to future events, even Christmas, doesn’t come naturally to him. Neither does answering questions or interpreting words and gestures. Hudson has his own way.

**Kelly thought,** *“So what if he prefers the sound of crinkling wrapping paper to the gifts inside? But a real Christmas tree...”* She was picturing Hudson’s eyes lighting up at the sight of it.

**Kelly opened the front door wide.** Alan was there, waiting to record Hudson’s reaction to the gorgeous evergreen tree now standing in their living room. “Hey, buddy,” Alan said. “What do you think?”

**Hudson looked at the tree.** His eyes didn’t light up. He didn’t smile. He might have been looking at a new piece of furniture. “Tree,” Hudson said simply. “Pine needles.” All the hopes Kelly told herself not to have come crashing down.

**Alan stopped recording.** His eyes were shiny with tears. “It’s okay,” he told her quietly. “We’ll decorate it together. Hudson will like that.”

**“Or not,” Kelly thought as Alan got the ornaments.** She knew it wasn’t fair to put her expectations on her son. It was her constant prayer not to let herself do that.

**God had given Kelly the perfect child, autism and all.** Hudson could never fail her. But at times like this, Kelly feared she was failing him. She felt helpless to find something about Christmas that spoke to her son. She prayed, “*God, bless Hudson. Help him enjoy Christmas in some way. In his own way. Even if I don’t understand it.*”<sup>1</sup>

**When the tree was finished,** the couple realized they’d forgotten one thing, the tree topper. “Do we still have the star you made last year?” Kelly asked Alan. “The jagged piece of cardboard I cut out at the last minute?” He laughed. “I threw it out after we took down our fake tree.” “Good. This tree calls for a proper topper. We’ll buy a shiny star this year. Or a beautiful angel.”

**“Star,” said Hudson.** Alan and Kelly turned to him in surprise. “Star on the top,” he said. The couple exchanged glances. “Okay, then, star it is,” Kelly said. “Let’s go online and pick one right now.”

**Hudson shook his head.** “I want to make another star,” he said firmly. “Don’t throw it away.” Alan and Kelly almost fell over each other, grabbing up art supplies.

**“What color do you want your star to be, Hudson?”** He chose a yellow crayon. They watched him color intently. When Hudson was satisfied, Kelly cut the star out for him. Alan attached the star to the top of the tree and turned on the lights.

**“I love my star!” Hudson exclaimed.** Kelly didn’t need a camera to remember the moment forever. “We will definitely save your star for next year,” she said. “Okay?”

**Hudson didn’t answer.** He was looking up at the star, his face split in a wide smile. The magi couldn’t have been more joyful as they gazed at the star leading the way. Alan and Kelly had their tree; Hudson had his star. God touched each one of them in a perfect way.

**Nora Roberts wrote,** “Nothing ever seems too bad, too hard or too sad when you’ve got a Christmas tree in the living room.”<sup>2</sup> And I think Kelly, like Mary, had a new moment to treasure in her heart.

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<sup>1</sup> Material drawn from <https://guideposts.org/positive-living/how-her-sons-homemade-star-brought-holiday-joy-to-their-family/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://guideposts.org/>

**What brings you joy?** I know one thing does ... pet videos. Whether it's the latest escapades of dogs and cats, animal rescues or Ozzie the weasel, our pets love their humans. And this gives us joy.

**There are other ways we find joy:** a walk on the beach, a trip to the mountains, being in a garden. Nature, God's creation, gives us joy. For some, being with other people brings joy. A great conversation, companionship, good laughs recharge our batteries. For some, a good book, music or a fun game may do the same. Time with your loved ones, a good meal and knowing you can be yourself brings joy.

**Here's one: remember when you were a kid, and you'd get totally lost in play?** It didn't matter what else was going on in your life; while you were playing you were lost in your own joyful world of fun. In early childhood, it was probably easy to get absorbed in a state of playful joy, but as you headed into your 'tweens, teens, and beyond, the worries of real life intruded, and you were less able to escape into play.

**What happened?** "I grew up," we say. "Life got in the way. I have responsibilities." I get it. We can even condition our children away from play as we direct them towards greater responsibility because we want them to be successful adults. I think being joyful is being successful.

**There is power in playfulness.** Even small amounts of play can have a big impact on the joy you feel. Some people look for ways to bring playfulness into their life every day. Doing so allows us to slip into the space of joy, and when we find it, we can carry it with us and bring it to mind whenever life seems to get too serious.

**Somewhere along the path to adulthood, many of us let go of our playfulness.** We traded fun for things we saw as being more grown up and in doing so, we lost one of our major sources of joy.

**I encourage you to find ways to play in this season and year around.** Dance, sing, spin in circles, or lay on the grass and look for four-leaf clovers. Sing at the top of your lungs to music in your car. Tell a silly joke or make a bad pun. Crunch your feet through the leaves. Lay on your back and look at the sky. Daydream. Play a rousing game. Build something with Legos. Ride a bike. Pretend. Laugh so hard you snort. Put on a t-shirt and act out the 12 Days of Christmas.

**There are hundreds of ways to bring playfulness back into your life.** Do it every day and remember the joy you once felt as a child. If you make a point to bring play back in big and small ways every day, your life can't help but be more joyful.<sup>3</sup>

**If this seems irreverent,** hear these words from Dr. Brian Edgar, a professor at Asbury Seminary, “For many the lightheartedness, the unpredictability and the fantasy of play appears to trivialize the spiritual life. There is a tendency to focus on more serious dimensions of religious endeavor, such as service, sacrifice, and commitment. But playfulness, properly understood, lies at the very heart of all spirituality and is critical for the whole of life.”<sup>4</sup>

**A playful attitude connects with the joy at the heart of a Spirit-filled life.** A certain playfulness in relation to other believers and God is central to joy. Paul described joy as part of “the fruit of the Spirit” as we anticipate the joy of being with Christ forever. This same anticipation is seen in Zechariah 8:5, where New Jerusalem is described as a city “filled with boys and girls playing (together).” Jesus said we should learn from children (Matthew 11:25). It seems like a good idea to consider play in our relationship with God and with others.

**Theologian Hugo Rahner said, “Mere seriousness doesn’t get down to the roots of things.”** Play isn’t trivial. Only a playful way of living does justice to the seriousness of life. There is a sacred secret in play: it’s the hope for another form of life. All play arises from the human longing for a vision of the divine.

**Just as in everyday life, work without play makes one dull,** and so, in the Christian life, service without a playful relationship with God leads to spiritual dullness. A playful spiritual life is one which emphasizes joy, delight, freedom, grace, and love.

**Spiritual life can be a journey of faith** involving all the characteristics of adventurous play: suspense and surprise, drama and danger, risk and reward, fun and freedom. Really, play is too good to be left to children alone! There is no time when we are as full of life as when we play.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.authorkarenfrazier.com/blog/finding-joy-through-playfulness#/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://thrive.asburyseminary.edu/article/play-and-the-spirit-filled-life/>

**A playful attitude lies at the heart of faith.** Play in the spiritual realm has the same qualities play has at any time: it doesn't deal with what is, but rather with what could be. A playful spirituality transcends our immediate reality and takes us into another world.

**Play is the expression of a free spirit,** done purely and only because we want to do it. There's no compulsion; no one can be forced to play. It's just like faith; no one can be forced to believe. There are no ulterior motives – it's done only for its own sake. The one being spiritual simply takes pleasure and delight in playing and, in faith.

**I'm not suggesting less work, and more play, is the secret to a strong spiritual life.** This runs the risk of trivializing the matter. It's precisely the reverse. A rich spiritual life leads us to play, and to everything involved in a playful attitude to life. This includes contentment in all situations, complete trust in God, the absence of worry and despair, and the presence of joy and happiness despite all kinds of pain. Best of all, it leads us to joy in unity, for when we play together, we come together.

**A playful attitude is directly connected with contemplative prayer.** Thomas Aquinas recognized the spiritual benefits of a playful attitude in life and in relationship to God. Rather than defending play, he threw out a challenge to common thinking and asked whether it wasn't sinful not to play.

**Aquinas taught us play has a spiritual impact on the ordinary activities of life.** He deliberately laid the groundwork for a positive view of play as intrinsic to a life of contemplative prayer. A playful attitude in prayer enables us to both explore and enjoy our life with God, as a person of faith and as a member of a community of faith, those who trust and love God enough to play together in the presence of the Lord.

**It is a joyful thing to appreciate God,** who wants to enjoy being in relationship with us, and to learn a playful attitude enhances every aspect of our life and ministry. It can be part of our growth in holiness and in understanding the nature of God more deeply. And it will bring us great joy when we play with the Lord as God's children.

**How will you find joy in this season and in the new year?**

Let's play together!

*Let us pray ...*

**Philippians 4:4-7 (CEB)**

Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.