

“Plays Well with Others

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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“Plays well with others” was one of multiple statements printed on some of my early report cards. I am reasonably certain that I am not alone in remembering that statement being on a report card from grade school. Having been out of grade school now for a few years I don’t know if the statement continues to be on report cards these days or not. I do know, however, that it has been included on report cards for decades. Because it was a few years ago, I don’t recall whether there were various options for the teacher to circle, options like “needs work,” “satisfactory” or other some other descriptive words. If my memory is accurate, which is debatable, I believe there was a place for the teacher to write comments. I don’t have any traumatic memories about how my teachers responded to this particular statement. This leads me to believe that playing well with others wasn’t an area where my behavior warranted concern. I think it is quite likely that by the time I began attending school my two older sisters had helped me learn many of the skills I needed to be able to play well with my classmates.

The fact that “plays well with others” has been on so many grade school report cards over the decades tells us something. It tells that learning to play well with others is important. It is important for the healthy development of each person as an individual. And it is equally if not more important to the wellbeing of all sizes and types of human groups. As we learn the skills necessary to play well with others we learn what is required to be in relationships that are beneficial and rewarding for all involved. And in the process of learning to play well with others, we build the foundation that is necessary to work well with others throughout the rest of our lives.

As I alluded to earlier, I credit my two older sisters with teaching me how to play well with others. I credit them because they were my playmates as a young child. Between the ages of 3 to 5 years old there were very few other children in the neighborhood we lived in. This meant I had two options when it came to play. I could either play by myself or I could join in on the play my sisters were engaging in. Joining my sisters in play required me to learn to play the way they liked to play. They weren’t interested in playing with toy trucks or building things by stacking small blocks of wood one on top of another. They were interested in playing with dolls and doing what might be referred to as “dress up” play. I have memories of dressing up in fancy clothes and playing as if we were going somewhere special. I will add here that almost all of the clothes were dresses. There are family photos of at least one such “dress up” play session. In those photos you wouldn’t be able to tell that there was one male child in the group of three children who were playing “dress up.”

As I think is evident from the play situation I just described, I learned quite early in life to attend to the wants and needs of others. In order to play well with others it is essential to attend to the wants and needs of one’s playmates. Play such as “dress up” or playing with dolls helped me develop a wide range of play options early on. I would invite each of you to reflect on situations involving play during your childhood where you might have developed your ability to attend to and honor the wants and needs of others.

While attending to the wants and needs of others is important, it is by no means the only important lesson playing with others can offer us. I will share a few I can think of and, as I do so, I invite you to think of others. Together I am sure we can come up with a list of important lessons we learned in the process of playing with others.

I recall quite clearly times when the way others wanted to play just didn’t work for me. In these situations I needed to let others know there were things I didn’t enjoy, appreciate or agree with. Sometimes I even needed to let someone know I wouldn’t engage in certain aspects of play the way they wanted me to. Two examples stand out for me.

The first example involved playing dress up with my sisters. I recall the time when one of my sisters encouraged me to put on a pair of high heeled shoes. I hadn’t yet celebrated my 5th birthday. All of the

clothes and shoes we played with were old and most were an adult size. The high heeled shoes were several times larger than my foot. So when I put the shoes on and attempted to stand up in them my entire body weight jammed my very small feet into the pointy end of the shoes. That was definitely unpleasant. What made things worse was that my sister expected me to walk across the floor in the shoes. With my very first step I fell over. My sisters thought it was great fun watching me attempt to learn a skill they thought was quite important. As you might imagine, I had a completely different perspective on the situation. That was the end of playing dress up with high heeled shoes for me. That play situation helped me learn to set personal boundaries.

The second example involved numerous play situations when I was between the ages of about 9 to 12. By that point my family had moved to a new neighborhood. In the new neighborhood there were quite a few children living within a couple of blocks of our home. One of the boys who lived on the block was a year older than me and he had a tendency, in my opinion, to be a bit bossy. When a group of us would be playing together, whether it was baseball or football or almost any other game, he would always be telling people how the game was supposed to be played. It took me a while but eventually I figured out the motivation underpinning his behavior. You see he was continually attempting to change the rules of the game. The purpose of changing the rules was to insure that he would win the game, which meant that others would lose. This was a significant awareness for me. I don't recall for sure just when I came to this awareness but it was around the time, or more accurately the incident, when he decided to take his bat and ball and go home. He quit playing and went home because he wasn't winning the game that day. His taking the bat and the ball we were all using meant the rest of us couldn't continue playing the game. The rest of us needed to find a different game to play, which we did.

This neighborhood boy taught me a very important lesson. Until that time I had assumed that the reason we were playing together was for everyone to have fun. He helped me realize that for some people the purpose of play, or almost anything else for that matter, is first and foremost for them to win. As I mentioned a moment ago, his winning required that others would lose. I am certain we have all seen examples of this in our own lives. Exactly 5 months ago today, on January 6, the entire nation experienced what can happen when such an "I win no matter what" perspective goes unchecked. I wish I could say that our nation has moved beyond that incident and that type of thinking. I wish I could say that, but I can't. Today there are some in political office who are working extremely hard to change the rules of the game. Their intent in changing the rules is to insure that they or those who have similar views win elections. When winning becomes more important than truth or than fairness the consequences can be dire.

Another of my learnings about playing well with others came about one day on the school playground when teams were being chosen for a softball game. That day I didn't get chosen to be on either team. Not being chosen meant I didn't get to play the game. I am sure there had been times prior to that day when someone else didn't get chosen. But the day I didn't get chosen made me realize what being excluded feels like. The experience gave me a new level of awareness, an awareness of what it feels like to be an outcast. And it help me develop a greater capacity for compassion. It opened not just my eyes but also my heart. It helped me learn that it is very important to find ways to allow everyone who wants to play to be able to participate in the game.

The situation I mentioned a moment ago, where some politicians are seeking to change the rules related to the how, when and where of voting, is an example of excluding people who want to and have a right to participate. There is another example of excluding people from the game that I want to mention this morning. In this state and numerous other states across this nation, laws are being established that will limit transgender athletes ability to participate on teams or in sports. The limitation will be based on the gender they were designated to be at birth. They will not be allowed to participate based on the gender they perceive themselves to be. I believe this is very disrespectful of people who are transgender. And it is a situation that perpetuates exclusion based on prejudice. As we progress through the month of June, a month that is recognized by many as "Pride Month," I would ask us to think deeply about what we might be able to do to counter the prejudice that exists, and the injustice that is being perpetrated, on those who are transgender.

Now I want to mention an example of inclusion—an example from within our Fellowship. With today's service, UUFB is taking intentional steps which will allow people who may not otherwise have been able to participate in our service to join us today. Prior to the pandemic, anyone who wanted to participate in our service on any given Sunday needed to be physically present in the building. That changed dramatically in March of last year as the pandemic began spreading rapidly. At that point we began live-streaming our services. This morning, as we hold our first in-person service in over 14 months, we are also live-streaming the service. We are live-streaming the service for those who, for whatever reason, are unable to be physically present with us. We will continue to live-stream services going forward in an effort to allow anyone who wants to join us, to participate with us, to do so. This is one way UUFB is striving to play well with others.

Much of what I have shared this morning has been my own learning about what it means to play well with others. What I have shared is only some of what it means to play well with others. The lessons I have mentioned include the following. It can be helpful to learn to play the way others want to play. It is very beneficial to attend to the wants and needs of your playmates. Setting personal boundaries is important, not just in play but in all aspects of life. The purpose of play matters. When one person or a group of people are determined to always be the winner and make others losers, the game isn't fun, it isn't fair and harm will be the result. And last but certainly not least, if we truly want to play well with others, we need to find ways to include, whenever and however possible, anyone who wants to participate.

These are only a few ways of thinking about what it means to play well with others. It is very likely that you came up with things I didn't mention. I encourage you to share them with me and with others in the Fellowship. As we take steps to return to meeting in-person again, I believe it will be important for all of us to attend to the lessons I mentioned, as well as the lessons you may have thought of. It is my hope that in the days, weeks and months ahead, we will all seek to do our best to play well with others. The better we become at playing well with others, the better the world will be for it.

So may it be.