

When our kids were little, we found ourselves suddenly immersed in things like playdates and trips to the park. In fact, as I prepared for today, I found myself curious about this, and so I asked Google: When and how did “playdates” become so popular? Turns out the term itself first appeared in the dictionary back in the 80’s when parents began seeking out more organized and structured interactions for their children. This form of play began to replace simply going outside and hanging out with the children in your neighborhood. The real explosion for playdate parenting, occurred in the early 2000’s, which explains why we found ourselves suddenly immersed in it. And I can’t quite remember if things were the same when I was a kid, but what I witnessed on these playgrounds and on these playdates that so amazed me was how easily children accepted one another. Over and over again, I watched them approach each other and say, “My name’s Jane...Joe...Billy...Sarah. Do you want to play with me?” And the other child would say, “Okay.” And off they would go. And maybe my own childhood was like that. I can’t remember. But I was amazed all the same. There was no evaluation needed. It was just, “You’re here. I’m here. Do you want to hang out together?” It was total and immediate acceptance, and my adult world had none of this. We were constantly evaluating one another and deciding if we were suitable “playmates.”

Now – mind you – our first child was born in 2008. If I think back to how things were in 2012 or so – in comparison to where we are now – things were pretty good. There was a hopeful trajectory about where things were going in the world that I don’t hear from people as much these days. Political skepticism has risen sharply since that time. There have been multiple social movements, calling out the ways in which poor behavior tends to go unchecked, which has added to our critical stances towards one another. And with multiple wars, ecological terror, the loss of life due to protest, and the separation of children and families in the name of policy, hope has really taken a hit. Many people are struggling to feel hopeful about the future, and it’s just heartbreaking to witness. And so today, my personal hope is that we will find ourselves re-connecting with the good that is there. I hope that, like little children, we’ll find ourselves able to reach out to one another and engage in ways that help us to reflect each other’s preciousness. And so, to move in that direction, I remember back to when I was first exploring the possibility of attending this church. In particular, I had a few questions about whether or not we would be able to find a church that aligned with our values. And so, I found it incredibly helpful to find that I could attend a service online first. I wasn’t ready to say, “My name’s Kristina. Want to play?” And so, I watched a service online from the comfort of my screened-in porch, and almost immediately, I began to feel at ease. Janet made an announcement about Equal Exchange, and I thought, “This is good. They care about fair trade.” Then Pastor Laurie started talking about “The Divine,” and I thought, “This is also good. And so let’s talk about this word “Divine” for a moment because, though the term can be traced back to the early 1300’s when it was used by theologians to talk about God as a Supreme Being, it’s become increasingly more popular in our modern world. And there are probably multiple reasons for this, but one that is often pointed to is that younger demographics of people wanted a word that aligned with their belief in a Higher Power but that didn’t carry as much dogmatic charge. And it’s even more than that. For instance, when we pair the word “Divine” with the word “Presence,” what we are talking about is “Godly Presence,” Presence with a capital P.

So if we refer back to. Genesis 1, verse 2, we hear that “ 2 the earth was a formless void,” that “darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” In other words, there was Divine Formlessness because, yes things were formless, but this formlessness was not devoid of God’s Presence. There was a wind from God that was sweeping over the face of the waters. The void was filled with God.

And as it turns out, many things can be described in this way. Take, for example, the notion of perfection. From a purely human point of view, perfection is actually quite difficult to achieve. Sometimes the notion of perfection is difficult because it's subjective – as we might say is the case with art. And, perhaps at all times, from a human point of view, perfection involves a great deal of mental and physical agility. We have to work very hard for it. Divine Perfection, on the other hand, is very different. Instead of being about the actual achievement of perfection, Divine Perfection, as defined by Richard Rohr in his book *The Universal Christ*, is “the ability to include what seems like imperfection.” Divine Perfection involves something or someone being filled with the Presence of God in spite of the ways in which it is flawed.

This is a very big deal. It means that nothing and no one can be omitted., and the early followers of Jesus were on to this. In Colossians 3:11, Paul tells us that: Christ is in us and in all. And if we think about that, we're bound to eventually ask: How is this possible? Paul is telling us that, in order to “lay hold of it,” we must accept the notion of Divine Perfection. We must accept that Divine Perfection accepts imperfection. Divine Perfection is being able to both see our struggle AND, at the very same time, see our blessing. It's a wonderful thing. But in order to experience this Divine Presence of God, both in ourselves and in the world around us, it tends to require intention on our part. It takes stopping long enough to see beauty and inherent goodness. It takes seeking out relationship with God – choosing not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – choosing relationship over judgment so that we can experience the goodness that we hear about in so many ways throughout Scripture. And so maybe we can ask ourselves another question: What would recognizing and recovering the Divine Image in all things look like in my life? And maybe more specifically – What would recognizing and recovering the Divine Image in all things look like – given the fact that I can also see the imperfections and the problems and the flaws? This is very much the sort of thing that takes Divine Intervention!

Because what do we do when our anger, outrage, and frustration will not accept that Divine Perfection is able to include imperfection? What do we do when someone hurts us or hurts someone we love, when someone hurts an entire group of people? What do we do when our critical self takes over? These become important questions for us, particularly in light of our long history with the critical self. In fact, to give us a sense of that history, part of what we're talking about today is what Richard Rohr calls Original Goodness, for which, the flip side of that is Original Sin. And so to give us a broader grasp of this, we need to look backwards in history. Where did Original Goodness take shape? When did this idea of Original Sin become so much more prevalent to us as a society?

To answer these questions, perhaps we can plot a point on the timeline for around the 5th century, which is where we encounter the work of the theologian St. Augustine, whose work with Scripture begins to hone in on Genesis chapter 3 – on that moment when Adam and Eve eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Augustine's work begins to focus on the imperfections named in Genesis 3 over and above the Goodness that is emphasized in Genesis 1 where God calls creation “good” 6 times and then “very good” in verse 31. He focuses, instead, on this act of choosing to eat from this one forbidden tree, and he tells us: This is the plight of every human. Sin has been passed down to you. You have inherited a horrible lot. It is at this point in time that the message of Original Goodness virtually disappears from the teachings. And as time goes on, a belief begins to emerge that humans didn't just inherit a horrible lot. Rather, humans are just plain horrible. And so if we keep plotting that timeline...

Martin Luther, born in 1483 and responsible for starting the Protestant Reformation, in his writings, portrays humans as a “pile of manure.”

Moving ahead a bit, John Calvin is born 26 years after Luther in 1509. His work begins to focus on the Sovereignty of God, and he institutes what has come to be called the doctrine of “total depravity.” In other words, the doctrine of “total corruption and wickedness.” Jump ahead to 1703, Jonathan Edwards is born. And among the many things that he’s known for, one of them is a sermon he wrote during the Great Awakening called: Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. Instead of emphasizing the goodness and very goodness of creation, we now perceive that we are nothing but sinners, and rather than God loving us, God is angry with us. Over and over again, this point of view is reinforced, and the results are actually quite catastrophic because they cause us to lose sight of important aspects of our faith, like grace and mercy and relational connection...

And so today, we return again to the good news of Genesis 1, and we take some time to let it marinate in our hearts: Creation is good and very good - not because we are perfect but because Divine Perfection is able to lovingly include imperfection. God is able to see those parts of us that not even we want to see and is still able to say, “It is good.”

So how do we engage with this notion of Original Goodness? What does all of this mean for our day-to-day living? Maybe for one, what if we add on to our definition of faith. Faith, generally speaking, is about having trust or confidence in something or someone. What if we add on to that: Faith is about having confidence that we are accepted, that we are loved – by God. What if God’s hands are not angry but loving? How does that change our interactions with God? How does that change our interactions with others? What does it look like to embrace hope that creation is going somewhere good? What does it look like to keep insisting that the arc of the moral universe is long but is still leaning towards justice, as Martin Luther King Jr said? What does it look like to agree with Lila Watson that your liberation is bound up with mine? I have to believe that these were inspired words. They ring inside of me. They raise my sense of hope, and we need that in our daily interactions.

Years back now, I attended a training centered around Trauma Based Relational Interventions where one of the primary principles of the training was: If trauma happened through relationship, healing could also be achieved through relationship. They reported in that training that 10 minutes a day of 1-on-1 time where the other person has 100% of your attention with no attempts from you in any way to teach them, change them, or mold them results in “massive change.” They told us that affirmation and engaged connection is what allows us to feel connected, respected, and validated. Makes sense, doesn’t it? What would it look like to offer 10 minutes a day of undivided attention to people in your life – 10 minutes of time where the only goal is engaged connection? Truth be told, I don’t even think it has to be 10 minutes. I have had people offer me a compliment in a moment where I felt vulnerable, and just that one little thing ended up fueling me in ways that were way out of proportion to the few seconds it took to say something nice. We need to be able to see each other’s inherent goodness. We need to believe it’s there, and we need to reflect it back to one another. We need to approach one another with Divine Wonder – just as preschoolers approach one another on the playground. What does it look like for all of us, regardless of what our age is today, to approach one another and say, “Hello! My name is Kristina. Want to do something fun, meaningful, impactful, playful...?” What does it look like to reflect to one another the words of Psalm 8:5: You are crowned with glory and honor. You are loved by God. What if this is the great work of our lives – to declare this Original Goodness and proclaim God’s inclusive love for us – imperfect as we are – and yet made perfect by God’s Divine Presence within? These questions in the air, let’s take a moment to pray.