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## Chapter 1

# What Is Godly Play?

### *The World Is a Dangerous Place*

*A family in our church suffered the loss of the mother and one son in a car accident. The father, one son and one daughter survived. The surviving son was in my Godly Play class last year. When I told the story of The Great Family, I asked what the most important part of the story was. The boy, then in second grade, said, “The part where you said the desert is a dangerous place is the most important because the world is a dangerous place. Bad things happen like car accidents and people get so mad about it but it just happens.”*

*Another child in the class looked at me and said, “Yeah, his mother and brother were killed in a car accident.” Most of the other children seemed to know this already and were nodding their heads. I thought it was so important that the children could attempt to process this tragedy and wonder about it together.*

—Cyndy Bishop, Godly Play Trainer

### *An Invitation to Godly Play*

This really is an *invitation* to Godly Play. I can't make you play, because play doesn't work that way. An essential quality of play is its freedom: its lack of compulsion. Do you want to play? Do you want to join in *Godly Play*? If you do, this book can be one way you begin to accept the invitation.

In Chapter 3, I'll explore play in more detail, as well as its counterfeit, pseudoplay, and its divine counterpart, grace. For now, though, I'll begin by describing what I mean by the word *play*. This five-part description, the one I use most often, is based on Catherine Garvey's book *Play*:

1. Play is pleasurable, enjoyable.
2. Play has no extrinsic goals. It is played for itself.
3. Play is spontaneous and voluntary. It is freely chosen by the player.
4. Play involves deep and active engagement on the part of the players.
5. Play has systematic relations to what is not play such as creativity, problem solving, language learning, the development of social roles and a number of other cognitive and social phenomena.

So there really has to be an invitation to play, not a directive based on power or an argument from authority. For you to enter into Godly Play, you must find it enjoyable.

You must want to play it for its own sake. You must choose to play it because *you* want to play that game. You must be willing to let go of the myriad mundane details of daily life and to enter deeply into the timelessness of play.

In Godly Play, the invitation is given not for play in general but for play with the language of God and God's people: our sacred stories, parables, liturgical actions and silences. Through this powerful language, through our wondering, through the community of players gathered together, we hear the deepest invitation of all: an invitation to come play with God.

## *An Adult Experience of Godly Play*

To experience Godly Play, you don't need to pretend to be a child. Instead, you can experience for yourself, as a teacher or parent, how a Godly Play session works. If you know of a church with an established Godly Play program, find out if they offer a parent participation session that you might attend. You can also sign up for a teacher accreditation event, offered around the country by experienced Godly Play trainers accredited through the Center for the Theology of Childhood (see Resources, p. 147). For now, though, I'll invite you to join in one adult session we can imagine together right now.

### *At the Threshold*

You approach the door of a Godly Play classroom. Seated by the door is a warm, inviting person—the door person for this Godly Play classroom. Something is already different: you don't walk into this room rummaging through your pockets for a pen or chatting with a neighbor. At this doorway, people stop and get themselves ready to go inside.

The door person smiles at you. "I'm so glad you're here. Are you ready?"

You think for a moment. *Are* you ready? Yes. This is why you've put this time aside—to play. To play with the language of the Christian people. "Yes."

He nods at your answer, and then, because no one is pretending that this is a classroom of children, asks two questions that children don't generally hear at the door of a Godly Play room: "Would you like to sit on a chair or the floor?" and "Do you have a cell phone?"

### *Building the Circle*

Cell phones turned off, adults make their way into the room. Some sit on chairs. Others sit, as children in a Godly Play classroom sit, in a circle around the story-

teller. She is talking quietly and easily with the people in the circle. A Godly Play community begins right here, by building a circle where each and every participant is warmly welcomed.

When everyone is welcomed, the circle is complete. Now the storyteller says, “We need to get ready for the story.” She shows how to get ready by sitting quietly, legs crossed, hands at the ankles. The conversation becomes a silence filled with expectation. She smiles and says, “Watch where I go to get this story.”

### *Presenting the Lesson*

The storyteller moves to the desert box—a large, shallow, wooden box on wheels, filled with sand. She brings it to the circle. “Keep watching,” she says and goes to a shelf filled with beautiful items: a rack of seven wooden cards, an ark with graceful lines, a length of heavy chain. She takes up a basket and brings it to the circle. She opens the lid of the basket and gets herself ready again; now all her attention is on the desert box in front of her. Your own eyes follow her focus and watch the sand.

“The desert is a dangerous place,” she says. Her hands slowly move across the surface, smoothing and shifting the sand. “It is always moving, so it is hard to know where you are. There is little water, so you get thirsty and you can die if no water is found. Almost nothing grows there, so there is almost nothing to eat. In the daytime it is hot and the sun scorches your skin. In the night it is cold. When the wind blows, the sand stings when it hits you. People wear many clothes to protect them from the sun and blowing sand. The desert is a dangerous place. People do not go into the desert unless they have to.”

She pauses. Then she lays out blue yarn and blocks of wood on the sand. She tells how, after the flood, people went out to the four corners of the earth. They lived along rivers and in villages and in cities. “One city was named Ur.” She touches a block. “The people there believed that there were many gods. There was a god for every tree, every rock, every flower. There was a god of the sky, the clouds, the water and the land. The world was alive with gods.

“But there was one family that believed that all of God was in every place. They did not yet know that, but that is what they thought.” She places two wooden figures in the sand and names them: *Abram* and *Sarai*, two members of the family who thought that all of God was in every place.

“When it came time to move to a new place, they were not sure that God would be there. So they wondered what the new place would be like.” She moves the figures slowly, one at a time, pausing often to keep them together, toward another block. As she moves them, you can see the footprints they leave behind in the sand.

Your eyes focus where her own eyes and hands focus on the small wooden figures moving through the sand. Perhaps you feel a little impatient, wishing she would just pick them up and put them by Haran. Perhaps memories of other times and ways you have heard this story drift into your mind. Perhaps you feel a pang, remembering a journey of your own. Just by growing up, each of us has known what it's like to leave behind a familiar situation for one that is at least partially unknown.

"It took a long, long time," she says. Finally, they arrive at Haran. The storyteller moves the Abram figure away from Haran, into the desert, where he 'came so close to God, and God came so close to him', that Abram knew what they must do: keep traveling. The journey continues, past Haran. They come to Shechem, and Abram prays. God is there. "So Abram built an altar to mark the place." She takes several stones from the basket and makes an altar in the sand.

She moves the figures slowly on. "Abram and Sarai come to Bethel, and God is in this place, too." She takes more stones and builds another altar. "Finally they come to Hebron and make their home. And there God changes their names: they are to be called *Abraham* and *Sarah*. God promises that even though they are old, they will have a baby. Abraham laughs. He and Sarah are too old!"

The storyteller sits back, but keeps her eyes on the figures as she tells how three strangers come and promise again that Abraham and Sarah will have a baby. Abraham and Sarah both laugh, "But do you know what happened?" the storyteller asks, her voice warm with pleasure. "They have a son. They laugh again, so they name the baby *Laughter*, as God told them to do. In their language the word for laughter is *Isaac*."

The storyteller pauses, and then her voice turns more serious as she tells how Sarah died and how Abraham sent his most trusted helper to find a wife for Isaac. "The helper finds Rebekah, 'as full of courage as she was kind'. The helper tells her about Abraham, Sarah and Isaac, and Rebekah travels back to join the great family."

Once more the storyteller moves a figure on the journey, now traveling again over the path made by Abraham and Sarah. She brings the Rebekah figure all the way to where the figures of Abraham and Isaac are waiting. She pauses. "Then Isaac and Rebekah had children, and their children had children, and those children had children. This went on for thousands and thousands of years until your grandmothers and grandfathers had children. Then your mothers and fathers had children."

She scoops up a handful of sand, and lets it trickle out. "Now you are part of that great family which has become as many as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand in the desert." She is so silent that you can almost hear your own heartbeat quicken at the thought of that great family of which you, too, are a part.

## *Wondering*

The storyteller sits back. Now, at last, she lifts her gaze and looks into the eyes of those seated in the circle as she asks, "I wonder which part of this story you like best?" She draws out the words, her voice careful and inviting. There is a silence almost electric with expectancy. Then one woman answers, "I liked the part where they built altars, because God was in Shechem and Bethel, too."

The storyteller listens, then touches the two stone altars in the desert box. "Altars... because God was in those places, too." Her touch is deliberate, almost reverential.

She looks up again. This time the man sitting next to you speaks. "I like the part where they named the baby *Laughter*." The storyteller grins and touches the Isaac figure. "They laughed again, and named their son *Laughter*," she repeats.

Two other people name their favorite parts of the story, then a comfortable silence settles again. Now the storyteller asks, "I wonder which part of this story is the most important part?"

The first person to answer this question speaks more slowly, as if working out his answer as he talks. "I think...the part about how all of us are now part of the great family, too." The storyteller nods slowly. She lets sand spill from her hand again as she says, "as many as the stars of the sky and the grains of sand in the desert."

Others name the parts where the family finds out that all of God is in every place, or where the family moves to a new home but remains together.

The storyteller affirms each answer and then waits before asking her next question. "I wonder where you are in this story, or what part of this story is about you?"

One woman wrinkles her nose and says, "I think the part where Sarah laughed, because she thought God's promise *couldn't* come true is about me. Sometimes God seems too good to be true!"

There is quiet laughter from several participants, but not a laughter that ridicules the woman. This laughter is a joyful affirmation of her words, the kind of laughter that says, "Yes, I've felt that way, too!" The storyteller touches the figure of Sarah and echoes, "And Sarah laughed."

An older man names the part of the story where Rebekah decides to join the great family as being about him. The storyteller affirms his words as she touches the Rebekah figure.

Finally the storyteller asks, "I wonder if there is any part of this story we could leave out and still have all the story we need?"

People are quiet as they think about this. Perhaps you think of some details you feel are unimportant: the names of the cities from which they came, or the way that God changes the names of *Abram* and *Sarai* to *Abraham* and *Sarah*. Some listeners offer tentative answers. One woman declares that she doesn't think any part of the story can be left out.

The storyteller listens respectfully to *every* answer. She repeats it, touches figures in the sand to illustrate it, but she never calls one answer good or another answer wrong. She simply listens and accepts the responses.

## *Response*

Finally the wondering sinks into silence. She invites you to watch again as she puts away the lesson, so you'll know where to find it. She asks you to think about what work you would like to do in response to the lesson. She shows where there are art supplies waiting.

One woman chooses to work with the desert box, and soon she is seated on the floor, leaning over the box, concentrating on moving the figures for herself. A man says that he wants to paint and walks to where the door person helps him get a tray, a paintbrush, a set of paints and paper. Perhaps you choose to work with crayons. You pick out three colors you want, and put them on a drawing board with a piece of paper.

You find a place in the room to work, and something strikes you about the way people move in silence. You've been in adult classes or groups where as soon as the presenter stopped speaking, listeners began chattering. This is not what happens here. Everyone has been involved in the story and the wondering. Now that absorbed involvement continues as people, one by one, name what response they choose to make and quietly rise to get their materials. For at least a quarter of an hour, people work at their responses. Some people make more than one picture. One person has gotten out a Bible and is reading silently the story of Abraham and Sarah. Another person is writing and making a little book of folded paper.

## *The Feast*

The storyteller turns the room lights off: a silent signal to everyone. She waits a moment, until all eyes are on her, and then says, "It's time to put away our work and gather again in the circle. There's no need to hurry. We have all the time we need. When your work is put away, come to the circle, and we'll get ready for our feast." Then she turns the lights back on. You take back your own crayons and drawing board, as others put away paints and story materials. The circle forms again, and the storyteller models getting ready for the feast by sitting cross-legged, hands folded.

One server spreads a napkin in front of you. Another server puts down several

crackers, and a third server puts down a cup of juice. The storyteller encourages everyone to wait until everyone has been served, so that prayers can be said before sharing the feast.

The storyteller looks around the circle. “It’s such a pleasure to be here with you today. Sometimes being together makes us so happy that we just have to pray. You might want to pray out loud, or to yourself. You might want to pray words you know, or words that come to you. You might not want to pray at all, and that’s okay, too. If you say a silent prayer, say ‘Amen’, at the end, aloud, so we’ll know your prayer is done.”

She looks to each person in the circle in turn. Some quickly say “Amen.” Some pray old favorite table graces, and some simply say words like, “Thank you, God, for this time together.” When the storyteller has said her “Amen,” you share the feast. Only crackers and juice? No. Something more is here: Community. Gratitude. Presence. God.

### *Saying Goodbye*

When the feast is finished, and you have put your trash in the trash basket, the storyteller once more draws the attention of the group. “It’s time to say goodbye.” One by one people go to the storyteller and she holds out her two hands. Most of these adults take her hands, but some lean forward and hug her. With each person she looks into their eyes, smiles warmly and says a quiet goodbye. “It was a pleasure to have you here today. Thank you for being with us.”

## *Reflecting: An Adult Experience of Godly Play*

If this were a Godly Play children’s session, this goodbye would send children out the door to join their parents. In an adult session, though, time would be set aside for the adults to reflect on the experience they shared. You, too, can take some time now to reflect on the experience of reading about this Godly Play adult session:

- Which part of the session did you like best?

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- Which part of the session is the most important part?



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- Where were you most real in the session? What showed you something special about yourself?

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- Is there any part of the session that could be left out and still leave all the experience we needed?

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## *Godly Play for Children and Teachers*

You still might be wondering: What are the benefits of Godly Play for my teaching? for the children of our church? for the teachers of our church? Godly Play is a distinctive approach to Christian ministry with children, both innovative and deeply grounded in our spiritual tradition:

- Godly Play helps resacralize the everyday things of the world, such as bread, wine, candles, oil, wood, linens and clay. Godly Play reteaches a sacramental worldview in a society that is so often utilitarian and materialistic.
- Godly Play teaches children and adults that being quiet and deliberate about their work can be as satisfying as being noisy, busy and pushy and delivers this counter-cultural message in a comforting and consistent way.

- Godly Play provides sensorial materials to work with in a safe, stimulating environment. In this way, Godly Play combines and integrates the two primary gateways to knowing for young children—language (the verbal system) and play (the nonverbal system).
- Godly Play is not a rote or transfer method of teaching and learning. It is a *discovery* method that engages the whole child—hands, heart, mind, senses, intuition. This is the best way for children (and adults!) to internalize what is being taught.
- Godly Play uses craft activities, but uses them differently from most curricula. Rather than have children create something prepackaged, each child creates an expressive response to what is individually thought and felt after receiving the parable or sacred story in a group setting. The children have the opportunity to enter the story, wonder about it and *then* create meaning for their own lives.
- Godly Play respects the many demands placed on teachers' time. Unlike many curricula, in which a teacher must plan new activities and gather new materials every week, a Godly Play classroom maintains a stable setup and routine from week to week. Teachers can focus their attention on entering deeply into that week's story and responding with complete presence to the community of children who gather there.
- Godly Play teaches reliance upon a gracious God who is real and accessible in all the mystery of life, both sad and joyful—rather than dependence upon the transient “magic” that comes from the latest movie, toy or video game.
- Godly Play teaches children to respect the things and people they work with, and to enjoy each with care and patience.
- Godly Play teaches the classic rhythm for living modeled in the Bible: the alternation of action and reflection, engagement and prayer. Godly Play teaches those who teach it and those who learn it to build a spiritual rule (or way) of life.
- Godly Play teaches kindness and mutuality through its rituals and by the way it organizes physical space, objects and the community of children. A Godly Play community embodies the biblical ethic of how people are to live together.
- Godly Play offers a contemporary and child-accessible version of the ancient spiritual practice of *lectio divina*: holy reading, wondering and responding to the Bible's sacred stories. Instead of analyzing God's word, the children meditate in an artistic and kinesthetic way. Godly Play helps children know God and the Bible instead of simply knowing *about* God or *about* the Bible.
- Godly Play teaches that everything in God's creation is charged with the possibility of holiness, including each of us, and that we are in relationship with everything in Creation. There is no sacred versus the profane; all ground is holy ground.
- Godly Play teaches that there is *kairos* time (significant time) as well as *chronos* time (chronological or clock time). *Kairos* time is not concerned with knowing *what time it is*. Instead Godly Play gives us time to see God in the center of daily life and to reflect on what time is for.

## *Reflecting: Going Deeper into Godly Play*

If you would like to probe these and other possibilities about Godly Play, you have several resources available to support your journey. This handbook (*Volume 1*) will give you an introduction to Godly Play in a variety of settings, while *Volumes 2-4* will give you the detailed notes you need for each Godly Play presentation. You can also find links to the community of Godly Play teachers and trainers, as well as pertinent theory and research by using the resources in the Appendix (p. 147).

You might want to pause and reflect on where you are in your journey, and how Godly Play can support that journey. Here are some wondering questions about you and Godly Play:

- I wonder what I like best about Godly Play?

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- I wonder what part of Godly Play could be the most important part?

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- I wonder if there is something in my life that especially responds to Godly Play?  
What is there in Godly Play that is especially for me?

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- I wonder if there is any part of Godly Play I could leave out and still have all the Godly Play I need?

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