

## Play to Win

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“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” -- Mark 8:35

How often have you heard someone say, “It’s only a game”? We usually hear it from a parent attempting to console a weeping child who’s just lost -- “It’s only a game” we say.

Sometimes we hear it from the children themselves, usually when they’re a bit older, and they realize that not being picked for the team has branded them a loser even before the ostensible game has begun -- “It’s only a game” they say in self-defense, as they look for another group with which to belong. Teenagers know, at some deep level, that the other, larger, much more important game is already well underway – the game of social relationships and hierarchies and positions; the game that will define them as popular or pretty or athletic or clumsy or inept for the rest of their lives.

And sometimes, sadly, we hear parents telling other parents, “It’s only a game,” when one parent has lost perspective and is yelling unseemly instructions or hurling invective onto the field or into the arena in which children were supposed to be playing a game. But the game seems to have morphed into something else for this over-zealous parent – usually a father – and he seems to be taking it much too seriously and he seems to be much too heavily invested in it. And we know, at some level, that such a parent is now attempting to work out, through his child, some murky psychological and emotional issues from the time when he was on the field or on the ice or on the court or on the mat. “It’s only a game,” we say. Back off, relax, get a grip.

Working out those issues, which we all do, leads to the sort of games social psychologist Eric Berne referred to in his book *Games People Play*, published way back in 1964. From years of clinical observation, Berne identified several games that we play with each other as we attempt to survive and even flourish in a sometimes brutal world. We unconsciously learned these games in our birth families, and if we reach adulthood, we’ve learned, again unconsciously, that these games work as survival strategies. That they’re often counterproductive, confusing, and even hurtful we overlook as the price we think we have to pay just to make it in life; or we say that that’s just me being me – bossing, bullying, whining, or avoiding. Passive aggression is a favorite game people play – what Berne calls “See What You Made Me Do” -- so that we can avoid taking responsibility for our role in situations of conflict.

These games are games insofar as they’re played according to a script or set of rules, often that we’re largely unaware of, but that they’re a game doesn’t make them any less serious than any of our other actions. We play these games with complete unconscious earnestness – and, to an outside observer, with distressing predictability – because we learned, a long, long time ago, that this behavior works, at least to a degree.

What counseling does – pastoral or secular counseling – is to help people see that the roles they’ve take on for themselves and the games they play in their interactions with others do not have to be permanent. When folks come to see people like me or

Penny Knight, they do so, in the vast majority of cases, because their games have become dysfunctional; they don't work any more. The players have changed, the circumstances have changed, and the roles have changed, but folks are still trying to play the survival game they learned in childhood. Every time we're confronted with the transition to a new phase of life – from childhood to adolescence, from adolescence to young adulthood, to young adulthood to middle age, and from middle age to old age – the game changes, and many of us have difficulty keeping up with the new rules, the new expectations, our new roles, and and our new abilities.

Everything I do as a pastor is a series of attempts to help a group of people called Faith United Church of Christ adjust to those changes by playing a game different from the one the world hands us. The game we play here, whose rules and roles and objectives I try to articulate for you in my study, in our classes together, and from this pulpit, is called Christianity, and my unrelenting, unchanging, and unapologetic appeal to you is for you to get in the game and to play it to win.

Now some of you may be thinking that by referring to Christianity as a game I'm not taking it seriously, but you would be badly mistaken to think that. It's only in our work-obsessed, capitalist-run culture that play has been replaced by work as that which we do with most of our waking hours.

For most of human history, people have played more than we have worked. For most of our 200,000 or so years of history as *homo sapiens*, we were what the cultural historian Johan Huizinga called *homo ludens* -- "playing people." Play is our natural state, to which we return as soon as our basic needs for food and rest are met, and those needs can be met in far less time than the half of our waking lives we give to meeting them in our culture.

Those of us who depend on English translations of the Bible read in Genesis 2:15 that the Lord God put the first human being in the Garden of Eden "to till it and keep it." The Hebrew actually says that the human was put in the Garden "to serve it and preserve it," and it's only later in the biblical story of origins that work becomes the onerous task that it is for many of us today.

To serve in God's garden of earthly delights is to live a joyous, carefree existence in which we are able, as a matter of daily fact, to consider the lilies of the field and the lessons they have to teach us, as Jesus urged us to do.

Jesus urged us to learn the lily's lessons because he knew that we are anxious people, and his call to his followers to take up their cross in order to follow him was not to make us more anxious but less. Jesus's cross doesn't shackle us to this world; it instead frees us from this real, so that we can better serve it as subjects in God's realm. The cross that Jesus asks us to bear isn't out there; it's in here. It's an attitude, a disposition, a conviction, and a determination to live free from the fears that keep us bound to this world: the fear of poverty, the fear of loneliness, the fear of illness, the fear of rejection, the fear of punishment, and underlying the fear of all these little deaths, the fear of death itself. We serve the gods of this world – the economic gods, the political gods, the military gods, even the religious gods – rather than the God behind them all, in the hope that our several fears will not be realized.

And in the majority of cases, they are not. Most of us do not live lives devoid of food, shelter, companionship, or purpose. Most of us live lives that are richly blessed, and some of us recognize that fact. And out of gratitude for the life we have, rather than out of fear of its loss, we turn to God in thanksgiving, freedom, and love. We turn our whole lives, not just our one-hour-on-Sunday lives, toward the source of those lives, in the same way a plant directs itself toward the sun, and for the same reason: we cannot truly and fully live without it. When we cut ourselves off from our true source, as so many

people do, we inevitably begin to wither spiritually and our lives begin to shrink. Having cut ourselves off from the Ground of Being itself, we feel ourselves to be alone and tiny and insignificant. And into that God-shaped hole that Pascal said is at the center of all of us, we will pour any and all manner of trinket, status, and relationship in the vain effort either to fill it or at least ignore it.

And Christianity teaches that God has carved out that space inside of us in the shape of a cross, and only a God who takes the shape of a cross can fill it. And that's why Jesus, I believe, told us to take up our cross and follow him.

We take up the cross that is both within us and outside of us, unique to each and every one of us, formed of self-giving love, not simply to crucify our ego-based selves, but much more importantly, to receive, through resurrection, our eternal, God-shaped selves in Christ.

That, friends, is playing Christianity to win. We've won when we can say, with Paul, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me."

When Jesus the Christ, the eternal, uncreated Word of God, is made flesh in our flesh – in our thoughts, in our desires, in our hopes, in our dreams, in our relationships and interactions – when others see Jesus in us, as we used to sing in the Baptist church – when that glorious and mysterious transfiguration has come to pass – we've won. We've played the Christian game, and we've won. We've played the game of life, and we've won. And no one can take that victory from us.

And so I ask you today, as I so often have asked you in the past: Is that not good news?