



SERMONS THAT WORK

Proper 24 (A)

Games

[RCL] Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

It's safe to say that among classic board games, few have more potential to inflame the passions of its players than *Monopoly*. If you have ever gathered around with family or friends after dinner to play the game, you might know all too well how a good-natured process of buying and building and passing GO can sometimes give way to bravado and belligerence as the evening wears on. For whatever reason, the lure of those fistfuls of fake money and the siren song of the Boardwalk can drive even the most congenial temperaments into a competitive frenzy. It is so common a problem, in fact, that the manufacturer of the game once set up a helpline during the Christmas holiday to try and reduce the number of family fights that inevitably erupt over rule disputes. So much for peace and goodwill towards all people!

If you blanch at the thought of the Christ child bearing witness to squabbles over fake real estate empires, though, today's Gospel might reassure you that Jesus has been dealing with tricky questions about money for a very long time. And it seems that he is largely unfazed by them. Are we to conclude, then, that Jesus is ambivalent about exploitative economic systems or that he urges some sort of spiritualized detachment from material concerns?

The short answer to both of these questions is no, but it is worth examining why this is the case.

The Pharisees, in asking Jesus this question about paying taxes to the emperor, are not genuinely seeking wisdom about the tension between spiritual and temporal authorities. They are simply trying to entrap him in an unwinnable game. They know that if Jesus says, no, you should not pay taxes to the emperor, he will be arrested by the imperial authorities. And yet if he says yes, you should pay them, he will appear to side with the empire against his own people. Either way, the Pharisees see an opportunity to knock him off of the board, as it were. What they do not anticipate, however, is that Jesus is not interested in winning the game that they are playing. He is coming into their midst with entirely new rules of play.

“Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's,” he says, holding up a coin with the image of Augustus on it. If this is the game that you are playing, he seems to be saying, then you already know what the rules are. But know, also, that God is not subject to your strategies. God is not one among many to whom you might choose to pay out a portion of your allegiances. God is

not interested in your coins but in your *conscience*, in your *compassion*, and in your *complicity* with the empires of this world. And God has not come to win the game you are playing, to monopolize your systems of control. God has come to show you a new way of being in which there are more than enough resources for all.

What could the Pharisees say? Whether out of shock or puzzlement, they do not say anything, and they go on their way. Whatever rulebook Jesus is playing by, it's not the one they were expecting.

Far from being uninterested in the matter at hand, Jesus reveals, in his answer, that the only way out of the dynamics that divide and oppress is to stop assuming that such a game can ever be won on its own terms. Whether one is an enemy of the empire or the agent of empire, the empire is still the word on everyone's lips, it is still the paradigm that captivates everyone's imagination, and Jesus invites people to start speaking of and imagining the Kingdom of Heaven instead. He invites us to conceive of a kingdom whose economics and ethics look radically different from anything dreamed up by Caesar, where you don't need to hoard properties because God's is a house with many dwelling places and you don't need a "get out of jail free" card because all of the bars have been broken open.

Can we begin to dream of such a place? Can we write new rules that more closely reflect the world of which Jesus speaks?

It is imperative that we do, not just to avoid fights on family game night, but because the entirety of creation is groaning under the weight of history's endless jockeying for supremacy, its endless extraction of the earth's gifts, and its endless striving to make gods out of coins. And the only way any of that will change is if we begin to change—if our hearts and our minds and, in turn, our systems and our social contracts begin to look less like empire and more like communities that protect the vulnerable and that steward the fragile ecosystems we call home. But as long as we rail against one another in our current mode, the ruler of this world will continue to collect payment, and we've already seen the results that will bring about.

So no, Jesus is not an advocate of the separation of church and state, nor is he one who finds economics too base for consideration. He is instead the One who has come to infuse with his Spirit our discernment of the complex terms of our common life. He is the One who has revealed that the one necessary rule is simply to love God and to love our neighbors. And the fact that we haven't yet managed to fully abide by that rule does not make us (or him) a loser. On the contrary, despite the best efforts of all the Caesars of this world to silence or co-opt the game, we still proclaim that empire is not the only way; we still haven't forgotten that another world is coming. And that is a victory bigger than any monopoly.

You might wonder, then, if Jesus was not here to play by that old set of rules, what was he playing at in the end? What board game was he inviting us into instead?

Maybe you'll come up with your own creative answer, but here's one to ponder: You know that game *Operation*, where you have to use tweezers to delicately extract the broken bones and the ailing organs from the body of a sick person without hitting the edges of the board? The one where winning looks like a person restored to fullness of health? Yes, Jesus was really good at that game, and he probably wanted us to become adept at it, too. Because if winning looks like anything in the Kingdom of God, surely it looks something like that: Wounds healed, fractures mended, and power demonstrated by tenderness.

What a wonderful game night it would make; what a wonderful world it would be.

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