

“This Is Not a Time to Play Games”

Gospel for the day—Luke 20:27-38

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A few months ago Matt Lauer had a feature on the Today show about the growing popularity of interactive board games. I understand there's even a new version of “Monopoly” available—the old Atlantic City locations in the old game sound pretty strange anymore. Crossword puzzles can even be a competitive sport, and there is a growing popularity for poker on TV. Perhaps you didn't know that an organized group is renting the parish hall for duplicate bridge—I keep meaning to go over there and check it out one of these days. Maybe I should talk to my grandchildren about video games!

When I hear this morning's Gospel from St. Luke it sounds as if the learned Jewish elders, the Sadducees, who didn't believe in the Resurrection of the dead, are playing some version of the game, “Trivial Pursuits” with Jesus. Jesus has now arrived in Jerusalem, just a few days before the Passover, a few days before his arrest and trial. His time is drawing to an end. Time is short and precious. The Sadducees finally get to encounter Jesus who by now was known throughout Judah as a miracle worker, a famous healer, the one who raised the girl from the dead, the one who had just thrown out the money changers, the one who had come into the city with everyone shouting and waving. He was even being called the next Moses. Some were saying he's the Messiah.

This is the moment for the Sadducees. And what do they do? They ask, “Teacher, if seven brothers die in succession and each marries the same woman, one after another, to whom is she married in heaven?”

EXCUSE ME?! Here they are before Jesus and is this the best they can do?! Play a game of Trivial Pursuits with Jesus?!! Karl Barth, the great 20th century theologian once said, “ The Bible gives to every person and to every era answers to their questions as they deserve. We shall always find in those questions as much as we seek and no more”

Do we use our questions to keep Jesus at arms-length? Do we only seek to play Trivial Pursuits? Are we afraid of encountering the living Christ because we haven't really thought of him enough to even visualize his actually being part of our lives?

It's clear in the Gospels that Jesus has no time for those who merely want to play games. He has no patience with those who merely want to trick him or to use him to prove how righteous or perfect they are. Usually those who waste his time don't come off very well. Indeed, after this exchange, Luke writes, "they no longer dared to ask him another question"

However, Jesus always has time for questions that are real. Oftentimes he answers with a parable: stories that will puzzle our minds and invite us to look at the world in a new way. Or he touches, he encounters, he relates. He invites people to journey with him in a new way. The Latin root of the word "question" means, "to seek". It's where we get the word "quest". To ask a real question is to enter a journey. It's to begin traveling along The Way. Jesus gets exasperated with the Sadducees simply because they aren't even willing to leave the station, much less go on a journey. They just want to play word games and stay right where they are. They aren't necessarily right or wrong; they are just wasting their lives.

Jesus would not allow the Sadducees to waste his time and his life. Remember my favorite New Yorker cartoon, of the boy watching his father change a car tire in the pouring rain, and the father says, "You can't change channels, this is real life!" Jesus wouldn't let the Sadducees change channels or divert him from the journey he knew was ahead for him.

Instead he invites the Sadducees to lay aside their hypothetical and stupid questions and think of a new world in which the living and the dead are inter-connected.

And he invites them and us now to join him on the way, the way to real-time answers to the questions that are deep inside your life, whatever they may be. Those questions are doors to walk through. Jesus says, "I am the Way" because with him and through him, we live our way into answers.

One answer you can give is very tangible, in front you today: your pledge to St. James'. On its face that sounds pretty crass and mundane to say that this is a big answer about your life, until you remember that **stewardship is ALL you do, once you say you believe.**

Two Sundays ago Dr. Frank Wade introduced our Annual Fund campaign from this pulpit, describing his as the annual "Sermon on the Amount." But you remember that it wasn't about any "amount" at all: it was on the Gospel for the day, a Gospel for the bible writers' principal theme of **accountability** and **responsibility**.

We can tell it's getting closer to Christmas by seeing all the catalogues coming in the mail. For all of you who already have some record of support for St. James', mixed among those catalogues was an attractive first-class packet from St. James' with its bright theme "Reflect, Rejoice, Respond." With all of the array of choices and the catalogues and other opportunities for support that come to you, your Church is now asking you to consider your motivations and your priorities, to rejoice in the ways that God has blessed you, and to respond with a pledge to St. James' that reflects your priorities in giving, to respond with a pledge that helps you build a standard of *giving* equivalent to your standard of *living*.

No, this sermon isn't about "the amount" either, but it is about money. Money is addressed more than 2350 times in the Bible, more than any other topic. That is three times more than love, seven times more frequently than prayer, and eight times more often than belief. Why so much about money in the bible? Because there is nothing in our lives that is more likely to take the place of God, to cause us to lose sight of what matters most, to just plain get us off the track.

This sermon is going to be a little bit shorter this morning because a good portion of what I want to say is in the stewardship packet "*Reflect, Rejoice, Respond*." That package, produced by your fellow parishioners, really is a big percentage of this sermon, because it says so much on why and how to look at your pledge in a new way. It's very important that you really study those materials, because otherwise it's easy to give into the worst disease of all—hardening of the categories—when you just see your pledge as a way to keep the church doors open and the Sunday School in operation; or at another extreme, to just give what you can, on the Sundays you're here, figuring that the big "Someone Else" will make up the difference.

But remember how a boy saved up \$38 in the first weeks of school? By eating other kids vegetables—5 cents for carrots, 10 cents for peas and 15 cents for broccoli! But no one else can eat your vegetables for you when it comes to your church pledge. It took yours and everyone else's vegetables to make our "Stone Soup" two weeks ago, I can say in all candor that the future of St. James' is also in your hands, as the stewardship packet describes.

And actually it's more than that, much more than that. Remember the story about Jack Benny accosting Benny in a dark alley, saying "your money or your life!" Benny hesitates and finally says, "I'm thinking, I'm thinking!" Your money or your life? How do you decide what proportion of your money you give away, and the priority you really give to God's work through this church?

That's not playing "Trivial Pursuits"—that's a decision about your life!

AMEN!