

The Game of Life

Matthew 5:1-9

March 6, 2016

The other night, I called my daughter Brigitta, the one who lives in Shanghai.

Okay, truth is I call her pretty much every night -- this is one helicopter that's not landing any time soon.

So I called and asked what she was up to -- it was a weekend night -- just curious.

It's Board Game night, she said, me and the guys are playing Settlers of Catan.

You may know it: Settlers is a great board game -- you build a settlement in, of course, the land of Catan, you build some roads, and over the next three hours you try to establish total world domination.

Or at least domination of 4 square feet of board.

My kids both love board games,

which is actually really surprising,

because they were raised by a mother who has basically been banned from all board game playing,

as was my mother before me.

My mother and I are not allowed to play games with family members,

because we are terrible, terrible losers.

Feet-stomping, fist-slamming, card-tossing, whiny losers.

The last board game I can remember my nuclear family playing as a kid was The Game of Life.

You know that game? Of course you know that game ...

I learned on Wikipedia that it's been around since 1860.

But if perchance you *don't* know it,

in the Game of Life, everyone starts off as a little pink peg, or a little blue peg, in a little plastic car,

and then you move through life, landing on spaces that demand choices,

you make decisions that will ultimately determine whether your life is a success,

And you get, if you're lucky, tons of paper money --

which, by the way, comes in awesomely huge denominations like \$50,000 bills.

In that case you end up at Millionaire Acres.

If however your poor life choices left you with a lesser amount of money, you end up at the Poor Farm.

At least, in *my* day, you ended up at the Poor Farm --
they've since changed the name, so now my kids just end up in "Countryside
Acres."

That's not all they've changed.

In my day also, there was a space you can land on that said simply
'Revenge.'

If you landed there, you could take \$100,000 from anyone you wanted.
Just 'cause.

They don't have Revenge any more.

Probably 'cause of people like me.

I don't remember the specifics of that last, final, game of Life with my family,
but I know it involved my brother using the revenge space on me, repeatedly,
I know I ended up in the poor farm...

and after that it's just a blur of paper money and plastic cars flying through the
air,

and the spinner on the board being wrenched off and hurled.

And so I'm not allowed to play board games any more.

I'll give you this, though --

as a grown-up looking back at the game,

it was pretty realistic.

In the *real* game of life, there are plenty of people who try to get lots of stuff to make themselves happy.

And Sometimes they are really mean to other people to get it.

And plenty of folks are hellbent on getting past all the other little plastic people on the road, and knocking them into the ditch on the way.

Things weren't really any different two thousand years ago, in Jesus' time.

I don't know that they had a board game for Life in Jerusalem, circa 33 AD, but they had pretty much the same concepts going.

There were people who were working pretty darn hard to get lots of stuff to make themselves lots of happy --

tax collectors who collected a little extra every time they came to your door, money changers in the temple cheating the tourists from the countryside.

Romans who bullied the Jews into doing their work for them, just cause they could,

or maybe just bullied, cause they could.

And in the midst of all this,

one sunny day, on a hillside, a man named Jesus stood up

and began to speak to the crowd that had gathered below him to listen.

And he said, people, I want to give you some brand new rules for the game of life.

And he said "do you want to be happy? do you want to feel blessed?"

and they all said, "well, yeah, yes we do."

And he said, "Listen up.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they, they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for justice --
they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, they will see God.

And blessed are the peacemakers.

Blessed are the peacemakers. They will be called children of God."

Blessed are the peacemakers, happy are the merciful --

And the meek -- they are blessed by God.

Well, that had to have sounded as upside-down and topsy-turvy

to the people back then as it still does now.

I'm going to show either my age or my geekiness now,

probably both,

but I still can't hear this passage without remembering a scene from Monty

Python -- Life of Brian -- watch it on Netflix sometime.

In the Sermon on the Mount scene,

two guys in the crowd, listening to Jesus proclaiming these Beatitudes,

turn to each other, befuddled,

and one of them says "what did he say? Blessed are the Cheesemakers?"

to which his friend responds

"I think he meant the dairy industry in general."

Truth is, blessed are the *peacemakers* would have sounded too crazy --

Cheesemakers was probably a lot more plausible.

Because they were living in a time of Roman occupation and cruelty,
where , everywhere, there were hopes for a violent overthrow;
some people were even hoping that Jesus was going to be the one to do it.
So, "Blessed are the peacemakers"? What?
How's that going to get us anywhere, Jesus?

And all these years later, two thousand years later,
when we listen, really listen, to this the most famed of Jesus' speeches,
we are still struck by the seeming craziness of it.

Blessed are the meek?

Blessed are the merciful?

Blessed are the peacemakers?

This is the right way to live?

Really?? Doesn't life need a revenge space sometimes?

Isn't this kind of -- I don't know -- *weak*?

Well, no, it's not weak.

The truth is that to live like this,

to *live* the Beatitudes takes more strength, more courage, and more integrity than any other way of living.

Take that word meek.

It doesn't actually mean doormat, the way people have heard it and dismissed it.

It means being that person who responds with calm rather than anger,

that person who has the backbone not to return evil for evil

but to remain utterly true to themselves and their values.

And that, that takes strength.

Or to show mercy, to offer forgiveness even when unearned, unasked-for --

I don't know much that takes more strength than that.

I keep thinking of what happened ten years ago,

when a gunman entered a school for girls in an Amish town in Pennsylvania,

and so many died, including the man himself.

Do you remember what happened then?

As a nation watched, astonished,

the families of those who had lost a child stepped forward, one after another,

to express forgiveness for the killer, Charles Roberts.

They took meals to his widow,

they turned out by the hundreds to attend *his* funeral as well as the funerals of their girls.

We, our whole country, we were in awe of their strength, their faith, because it just didn't waver.

I read, later, one news article in which the reporter was trying to explain why the Amish had behaved like this.

And he explained, as if with some bemusement,

"The Amish closely follow the teachings of Jesus."

Yes, they did. They did.

Or last summer,

after another act of violence, this one at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston.

Do you remember watching another act of courage,

of extraordinary strength:

Nadine Collier in that Charleston courtroom,

Nadine Collier, who had just lost her mother at the hands of gunman Dylann Roof.

Nadine Collier who also, as it turned,

followed closely the teachings of Jesus.

And just the same thing as the Amish:

"I forgive you," she said to Dylann Roof . "You took something very precious away from me.

But God forgives you, and so I forgive you."

Blessed are the merciful, for they know mercy.

Blessed are the peacemakers.

Blessed are the meek, but oh what strength it takes --

To choose **not** to land on the Revenge space in the Game of Life?

You don't think that's courage? You don't think that's strength?

There is nothing weak about these Beatitudes.

It was these scriptures that led a man named Martin and many hundreds of others across a bridge in Selma,

led them into the path of police dogs and fire hoses,

and that took courage that still takes our breath away.

"Aren't you just being idealistic?" King was asked time and again.

"Isn't this non violence just unrealistic?"

And he responded like this:

"Love even for enemies," he said, "is the **key** to the solution of the problems of our world;

Jesus is not an impractical idealist:
he is **the** practical realist."

These many decades after Martin Luther King,
we are living through a strange political season --
and strange is the mildest word for it.

Troubling is more like it.

And it is impossible not to see the contrast between Jesus' speech on a mountainside long ago,
and the speeches we now hear.

It is impossible not to hear the difference between the words we heard from that lectern just now ...

and the words we hear from the campaign trail.

Here, we've heard Christ call us to hunger for righteousness --

there we hear the call to hunt for scapegoats.

Here, we've heard words of mercy,

there we hear voices raised in anger.

Here, we are urged toward peacemaking,
there we are witness to fearmongering.

And as they did two thousand years ago,
Christ's words stand against these.
Christ's way is a different way.

I started off talking about the game of Life, which I always seemed to lose,
and lose ugly.

The life that **we** have is no game, but a gift.
And the rules we've been given don't mention a revenge space,
don't tell you how to push the other players into the ditch.

The rules we've been given,
well, they're not so much rules.

They're promises.

If you live with mercy, then mercy is what you will know.

If your deepest hunger is for what is right, then you will be filled.

If your heart is pure from hatred, then you will see God's love everywhere you look.

If you choose the way of meekness -- which is the soul's strength -- then you will know God's kingdom on earth.

And if you are a maker of peace, then you will be called a child of God.

And then, and *then* --

everyone wins.

Promise.

Amen.