

Pastor Roy's Sermon from August 28, 2016

8/28 Children's: What is your favorite board game? Is it fun to win? How do you feel when you lose? Why does it matter if we lose? When are games the most fun? Is it fun to play a game with someone who gets mad when they lose? What is more important about playing a game?

Most of us have played Chutes and Ladders or Candyland. If you play by the rules, you have no chance to influence the outcome. And yet we want to win. . .As children we learn how to win and lose playing games like these. I recall a game of Candyland with my 3 children before I met Gail, and the game was going a little rough and one of the children was having a hard time with the way the game was going and had made it almost to the winning square at the top of the board, and picked "Plumpy" --meaning he had to go almost all the way back to the start, but we all yelled Plumpy! and laughed and suddenly the laughter trumped the frustration and all was well. At that point, I believe the goal of the game became to get sent back to the beginning, and for the game to last forever. For those moments it was not about winning or losing but about enjoying the unexpected twists and turns. . .and laughter. There was hope.

As children, soon enough, with the passing of time, skill is introduced to virtually every game we play. Beyond games, everything that we do is influenced by skill and, of course, also luck. Fortune is always a player. Sometimes we forget how much of our lives have been influenced by good or bad fortune—happenstance--just the way things go and are far beyond our control. Gratitude does not come easily to those who are in control of their destiny. And so, like the people at dinner with Jesus, we sometimes think that life is about getting ahead of everyone else--to the top of the ladder/to be the first to travel through Candyland, to arrive at security and happiness whatever the cost. This is true of people and nations.

And here is Jesus at an elite dinner party reminding us that joy comes from not stepping on or around, but stopping and helping the people who have fallen off the ladder or have picked the card that sends them back to the beginning. How much more is this true as we see that those who at the top are no different than those who are at the bottom or that the life experience at the top is no better than that at the bottom. If anything, it is often worse. In our guts, when we are not mindful, we would rather have the approval of the people around us, than to be content, patient, grateful, and filled with joy. Isn't that odd? That is sin. That reveals our brokenness/our lostness.

How much of what we do and what we say is driven by what we want others to think of us? Deep inside we all want to be honored, to be noticed, to be adored, to be valued, to be appreciated. There is no questioning this is true. We think many thoughts positive and negative, but when someone *else* says something good about us, it validates us. There is nothing wrong with that. We all need encouragement.

But I believe Jesus is pointing out the feverish level of the guests ongoing, non-stop competition to be top dog in everyone else's opinion. And Jesus is quietly asking--who's opinion really matters? Are we more concerned about impressing others or even ourselves? Or...or will we train ourselves in the ways of grace with Jesus before us? Will we have the courage to choose to struggle to bring ourselves in line with the most profound elements of the universe—that is, grace, not subject to all of our whims/which is the will of God?

In his invitation for all to live the life of God's kingdom, a kingdom of radical grace not according to our rules, Jesus offends everyone at the dinner—host and guests alike. "When you have a dinner party, do not invite or help friends, brothers, relatives, or rich neighbors, they might actually repay by returning the favor. No, no, no. When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed (!!!) because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. In other words, by doing for those who cannot return the favor, we are making a difference, we are not acting selfishly, but selflessly.

We are investing in grace and beating back our mindless drive to achieve. Helping those who have fallen off the ladder makes a difference in the long run for our souls. Our souls grow when we live selflessly, they shrink when we live selfishly. We deny the abundance and blessing of God and God's creation when we live for our own good. We confess the abundance and blessing of God and God's creation when we live without concern for our own wellbeing—as hard as that is!

Let us be mindful of the abundance around us to share and care for all of God's children. May we seek contentment, patience, gratitude, and to be filled with joy as we struggle to be as mindful of those around us as we are of ourselves. Amen.