

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Alive in a Global Uprising: Playing the Game of Life”
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Ecclesiastes 5:18-20; Matthew 5:17-20

He was “that guy.” He was that guy that no one really wanted to play with. Let me explain. One of the best things that my former congregation ever did was to build a gym. They needed a larger fellowship hall and so rather than simply extending the old one, they built a gym. And the gym was the most widely used part of our facility. It was used by basketball leagues, scouts and any number of other groups. One of the groups that used it was a twice a week men’s pickup basketball league...of which I was part for almost fifteen years. It was one of those leagues where men and women, by the way, of all ability levels could come and play. You kept your own score and you called your own fouls, with the understanding that you only called a foul when it was pretty egregious. But then there was that guy; that guy who we dreaded playing with because he called everything that even remotely looked not only like a foul, but traveling, double dribbling and anything else one could think of. It made games long and torturous. No one liked playing with that guy...which is why I wonder why anyone would want to hang out with Jesus...because he seemed to be that guy.

I say that Jesus is that guy because of what he said in this morning’s passage. *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore, anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”* This is legalism at its best, or perhaps at its worst. And Jesus doesn’t stop there. Oh no, he says things like, Moses said you shall not murder, but I say if you get angry you are a murderer. Or, Moses said you shall not commit adultery, but I say if you look at someone with lust in your heart, you have committed adultery as well. Jesus certainly seems to be that guy, who plays above and beyond the letter of the law.

And it didn’t stop with Jesus. The church took up the mantle of being that guy. The church focused on keeping people in line through an application of extreme legalism of all forms. You don’t believe our particular theology...foul, you are out. You don’t agree with how we run the church...foul, you are out. You smoke, drank or danced...foul you are out. The church spent almost two thousand years defining and refining the rules and regulations that insured that everyone toed the legalistic line. One of my favorite stories of this church is that back in the 1800’s they kicked a church member out because they caught him harvesting his wheat on a Sunday...for the second time. They had warned him the first time, but he didn’t listen, so he was gone. The church it would seem was just following Jesus call to be more righteous than the Pharisees. But what if this is not what Jesus actually meant? What if Jesus was not calling for a return to legalism. What if he was the guy who simply wanted to encourage us to focus on playing the game and not on enforcing the rules?

Before we move forward I want to explain what I mean by “the game.” I am talking about the game of life, not the board game, but life itself. The game of life is, according the scriptures, to be lived in such a way that all human beings find love, joy, peace, fulfillment, abundance and blessing. It is

supposed to be the kind of life Jesus described in the Beatitudes when Jesus spoke of those who are blessed, who are cared for and loved by God. What this means is that the game has two components. The first we can see in our text from Ecclesiastes. *“That it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them—for this is their lot (5:19). Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God.”* This is the component of enjoying the good things that life gives to us. The second part is our participation in insuring that all people have those same blessings. Do we have enough to eat? Then others ought to as well. Do we have a place to live? Then others ought to as well. In essence the game of life is a team sport, where we work together to insure all people can enjoy the life that God and God’s creation make possible. With that in mind let’s return to Jesus.

I want to argue that this, meaning playing the game, is what Jesus was focused on. I say this because he tells the people, *“For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”* I realize that this sounds like Jesus is doing the opposite; that he is focused on the rules and not the game. It may do so because we often associate “righteousness” with rigorous rule following. But that is not what righteousness is all about. Righteousness is a positive descriptor. It is focused on doing what is right rather than focusing on what is wrong. So to say that our righteousness has to be greater than that of the Pharisees is saying our lives need to be lived in a more self-consciously positive, loving way, rather than a negative, rule keeping way. Because when one is focused on the rules, when one is “that guy” then the game never really gets going. You are stuck at the free throw line, rather than being on the court, or in this case the Kingdom of Heaven, being actively engaged in being the blessed and blessing people of God.

So what then about the rules? What then about Jesus’ statements about being angry is the same as murder and lusting is the same as adultery? Two things. First, Jesus understands that rules are necessary. Without rules all one has is chaos. Can you imagine trying to play any game without rules? Basketball would soon look like rugby and bridge would soon look like go-fish. Second the rules are God’s rules intended to promote the playing of the game. They are given for the benefit of the people because they focus on helping people live the game more fully. Care for the poor, the stranger, the refugee. Treat the property of others as you want your property treated. Be honest in business dealings. Let your yes be yes and your no be no. These are rules that set the tone for the game, including not being angry, not lusting and the like because those actions get in the way of both being blessed and of blessing others. In essence, Jesus wants us to know the rules, but only for the purpose of being a people of blessing.

Jesus is not “that guy.” Instead he is the one who calls each of us off of the bench and into the game; the game of doing what is right by God and for neighbor and creation. This morning, I want to offer you a different kind of challenge, and that is to participate in our Lenten projects that are game changers, if you will, for people we will never meet. The first is to give a donation to the One Great Hour of Sharing offering...all of which goes to change people’s lives. The second, is called Sole-Hope. All you must do is to find your old jeans or other denim and bring them to the church as we to begin the process of helping people make shoes which will ward off life debilitating diseases. They are both simple acts, yet they are righteous acts; acts that bless others in the name of Christ. They are acts which get us in the game; the game of life helping to insure that all people get to experience the fullness God has to offer.