

**New England Synod, ELCA
Doing What Matters
Fall Sermon Series 2011**

“Let’s play a Game Together”

Do you remember Mary Poppins? It’s one of my all-time favorite movies. My favorite scene in the film is when Mary Poppins first arrives. After she has flown in on her umbrella, and sent all of the other potential nannies sailing down the street, she enters the house, meets Mr. Banks, the father, and then heads upstairs to children, Jane and Michael’s room, which is a complete mess. Her first order of business as their new nanny is to make sure that these two children clean up their room. As most children would be, they are horrified. It’s the last thing in the world that they want to do. They’re reluctant to do it because they, like all children their age, know that cleaning up isn’t nearly as fun as dragging out all of the toys and playing. This scene gives us insight into why Mary Poppins is so good at what she does. She lets the children in on a secret that most adults, and nearly every nanny they’ve ever encountered, doesn’t know. The business of life is more fun when we make everything that we do more playful. She tells them, *“In every job that must be done, there is an element of fun. You find the fun, and “snap”, the job’s a game.”* Over the course of the next few minutes, Jane and Michael find that this is true, and they have more fun than they ever dreamed was possible playing a game of “clean up”

Life is more fun when it’s done playfully, when we find that element of everything that we do that makes the task-no matter how mundane-less of a chore, and more fun. I wonder how the work that we do in the church might benefit from this same simple principle. Let’s play a game together for the next several weeks and see how purpose and principles can come to life before our eyes.

Sunday September 18

**God’s purpose for the New England Synod:
To go where love leads
To serve where love calls**

Matthew 20:1-16

Jonah 3:10-4:11

Philippians 1:21-30

“Hide and Seek”

As a child, hide and seek was one of my all-time favorite games to play. My sisters and I played it in the house, hiding behind chairs, under beds, or in the pantry in the kitchen. Can you remember the last time you played hide and seek? Can you remember the feeling of knowing that you only had until the count of ten to find that perfect hiding

spot? Do you recall the feeling of anticipation as you tried to be as quiet as possible, especially when your sister came into the room and you could see her feet from under mom and dad's bed? Do you remember searching for your siblings or friends, and wondering where they might be?

God knows what it's like to play hide and seek with us. God did it with Adam and Eve, after they had eaten the fruit that God had told them not to touch. They hid in the garden when they heard God's footsteps coming near, trying to be still enough so that they wouldn't be found. God knows what it's like to play hide and seek with people like Jonah, who should have been in Nineveh, but was hiding out way over in Tarshish, hoping the presence of the Lord wouldn't find him there. God has played hide and seek with people like you and I since the dawn of creation. The funny thing is, no matter how hard we try, no matter how many out of the way places we find, no matter how still and quiet we are, God always finds us.

Jesus tells a story in Matthew's gospel, about people who are looking for work. They've looked before, and found it in the center of town, in a place where landowners come to call laborers to work in their fields. So, they gather there and wait to be found. Over the course of the day, many of them are. They are called by different people to go and serve. To work for the day, and make money to feed their families when the work is done. Some of them are left behind. I wonder if the ones who hadn't been called began to think that something was wrong, around 4:45 when no one had come to find them and give them work? I wonder if they felt unnoticed, lost, or hidden? Maybe they felt as though they were playing a game of hide and seek without realizing it, only no one was coming to seek them out. All of that changed around five o'clock, when one of those landowners returned, found them, and asked them to go and work for him.

This is a story, like others that Jesus has told, about finding something unexpected. There, hidden in the heart of this landowner, was a grace that no worker in those fields had ever experienced before. For some, it seemed unfair—a full day's wage for working just a short while. For others, it was life-changing—a full day's wage that would provide for their family waiting at home. Maybe the most miraculous part of this story is what isn't written in the pages of the gospel. Can you imagine the joy, written on the landowner's face, when he handed those who were the last to be called a full day's pay? I'll bet it was the highlight of his day! I'll bet he also knew, long before she ever uttered those words, what Mary Poppins meant about finding the fun in life, and how playful that makes everything seem.

I'll bet that God loves the game of hide and seek that we've played together for so long. I think God's favorite part of it must be the seeking, the finding. Where do you hide most often? Maybe you're like Jonah, and you hide in the last place you think God would look. "God said go to Nineveh, He'll never find me way over in Tarshish!" Maybe you hide in a familiar, comfortable place, never intending to move from that spot. Maybe you hide in your work, out in the fields all day, forgetting that there are people in

your life waiting alone somewhere else. What we may forget, when we choose our own hiding places, is that the game is more fun when someone's looking for us.

Hidden in the world, down a side-street in Bethlehem, in a stable beneath an Inn, God found us. From that moment on, God's search took him to lakeshores, tax booths, dinner tables, and a well in the middle of a hot day. In all of these places, God found us. Hiding in the work of mending fishnets, hiding in the profit from other people's lives, and just plain hiding from the rest of the world. No matter where people like you and I have chosen to go, God finds us. And God is thrilled to do it. Hidden in a cross on a hill, God found us. Hidden in that cross was a gift unlike any we had ever dreamed of. On it, we were paid in full, even if we didn't deserve it, work for it, or earn it. Hidden in the life of God's Son was a gift of new life that finds us all, whether we've been hiding for days, years, or a lifetime.

Do you remember how fun it is to play hide and seek? God does, too. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God invites us to play some more. To go to new places, seeking the love that leads us there. To serve in those places, finding the love that sustains us, gives us purpose, and makes life worth living. If you're hiding, whether in Tarshish, out in the field, or waiting in the center of town-you've been found. Now, it's your turn to do the seeking: going where love calls, and serving where love leads. When you get there, you'll find treasures beyond anything you've ever imagined, and the joy of God's own brand of hide and seek!

Sunday September 25

Pray Always

Matthew 21:23-32
Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32
Philippians 2:1-13

"Name that Tune"

"I can name that tune in six notes." Anyone who's ever seen the game show "Name that Tune" knows where this phrase comes from. The game relied on contestant's knowledge of popular music, and pitted them against one another as they competed to identify songs faster than their opponents.

If you've ever spent time in an elevator, or a department store, then you've probably played "Name that Tune." The "muzak" that is piped into these spaces is often watered down versions of familiar songs. As we wait to arrive at our floor, or as we walk through the store, the music is often playing in the background. Sometimes something funny happens when we're in these spaces. We begin to hear the music. What was once just background noise all of a sudden comes to the forefront of our minds. Maybe it's a favorite song of ours, presented in a different way, and it catches our attention. Before

long, we've stopped what we're doing, and our brain is sorting through all of the music that we've ever heard, until it lands on that song. This process interrupts our day. Suddenly, we're no longer shopping or daydreaming, and now we're listening, searching, identifying.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus finds himself in middle of a game of "Name that Tune." His day is interrupted by the chief priests and elders who barge in on the lesson he's teaching in the temple. When they arrive, they're playing a tune. It's a song that commands his attention, and one that they would like him to identify quickly. The song that they're playing might be one that you know, too. They might have been singing a song that was written by Jean Knight, and may have appeared on Name that Tune in the 1970's. It's hook went like this: *"Mr. Big Stuff, who do you think you are?"* Could you name that tune? They come to Jesus, wanting to know who he thinks he is, and who gave him permission to do the things he's doing. They sing it to him right there, in the middle of the temple, and wonder: can he name the tune? The problem for them is that Jesus can name it before the words are even out of their mouths. Maybe they wished he didn't have such a hard time identifying it.

You can't play name that tune if you're not listening. The chief priests and the elders are so busy interrupting Jesus as he teaches that they can't hear the tune he's playing for them. They're stuck playing their own tune, and because of it, they're going to lose this game.

Playing Name that Tune with God is the same way. We'll have a hard time hearing it, identifying it, singing along, if we're too busy playing our own tunes all the time. Mother Teresa was once asked in an interview about what she says to God when she prays. She responded: *"I don't say anything, I just listen."* When the interviewer asked her what God says to her, she replied: *"He doesn't say anything, He just listens."* This makes me believe that God loves playing Name that Tune with us all the time-listening to the songs that we're singing, and playing a song back to us that goes right to our heart.

Praying always is about listening for God's tune in our lives. Have you heard God singing to you? Have you picked up on the melody that God's presence is weaving into your life? When was the last time you identified God's tune and really heard what it was saying to you? When was the last time God's song interrupted your daily life, and made you stop what you were doing long enough to just sit and listen? When was the last time you heard God's song and started singing along?

Jesus tells a story about two sons to the chief priests and the elders who interrupt the song that he's playing to the listening ears of his students in the temple. These two young men have heard their father's familiar tune many times. Maybe his request to stop what they're doing and go work in the vineyard has become like a broken record, a daily song that he plays to them day after day. When the father shows up early in the

morning, dragging these two sons out of bed, he's playing his tune. Like a bugle playing Reveille, I'll bet they knew exactly what it meant. I'll bet after all those years, he played it effortlessly. Like Jesus did with those who interrupted him, they can name their father's tune before he even speaks a word. They identify it, and respond. One says "I'll go", but doesn't. The other refuses, but later changes his mind and heads to the vineyard. Jesus question is simple: "Which one did what his father asked?" The answer is obvious. The song that each son sings back to his father tells us who really heard the tune, who really understood the purpose behind it. The father sings a song that is about relationship. One day, one of these sons will sing it to his own children. It's a song about love for the family, and love for the vineyard that is their livelihood. It's a song that their father's father sang to him. That's why the father knows it so well, and plays it each day without effort.

God's song to us is a song about the family of God. It's a song that sings the story of creation, and invites us to get out of ourselves enough to go and work in God's vineyard. If you stop and think about, I'll bet you can identify some of the places where God has sung this song to you over the years. I'll bet that in many of those times, you could name God's tune after just a few bars were played to you. Some of those times you were like one son-pulling the covers back over your head and going back to bed, but then reconsidering later on and heading to the vineyard. At other times, you were like the other, saying you'd go as long as the music would stop, but then lying in bed for the rest of the day. Whenever this happened, whether you knew it, or not, you were praying. When God's melodies hit our ears, and penetrate our hearts, we're drawn into deep communication with our creator-we're praying with God.

The gospels are full of stories of times when Jesus retreated to a quiet place to be alone, and pray. When we read his story we find that Jesus was always praying. One of the most powerful stories of Jesus' prayer happened in the garden, the night he was arrested. We're told that Jesus' prayer was so filled with emotion that he began to sweat. I think this happened because he had heard God's tune, the one that was being played into his life at that moment. Like the two sons from his parable, Jesus wasn't sure this was a song that he could play along with. God's tune for Jesus was a new one, and unlike the others, this one could not be played effortlessly. This tune was a song that would end with new life, but that had to weave its way across the notes on the page through death to get there. Jesus listens to it, and prays with all that he has in him for God to sing a different song.

We've done this before, too. God's tune hits our ears, stops us in our tracks, and calls us with pure love to go and serve. The only problem is, often we'd prefer a different selection. We'd like to skip past this one on God's ipod, go back to our shopping, or get out of the elevator altogether. Like the two sons in Jesus' story, we know the tune, but we'd rather not sing along. But God keeps singing. Praying always is like this. God is always doing it, and when we join in we may hear things that we've never heard before. We may hear new calls that claim our lives, sing to our hearts, and invite us to go to new

places. Praying always is like listening to God's tune and weaving ours into it for God to hear.

God kept singing this song of salvation to Jesus. It was a song of love, and it led him to the cross, somewhere that no one would willingly choose to go. No one but a loving, obedient son. When the song goes on, so does Jesus. When the Father's will is clear, he goes.

You can name the tune that Jesus sang to you on the cross. If you listen every day, you will hear it. It is a song that was played to you in the waters of baptism, and it weaves its way through your life each day. It is a song that you hear when you come to the table, and it feeds the call to go into God's creation and love and serve. Praying always is listening to God's tune, naming it, and singing along. It is a song that God is always playing, and if we listen, we'll hear it. Can you name that tune today? Will you sing along with it?

Sunday October 2

Give of Ourselves

Matthew 21:33-46

Isaiah 5:1-7

Philippians 3:4b-14

"Mad Libs"

Let's play a game of Mad Libs together. You remember how this game works, don't you? You get a paragraph, a story, with all kinds of blanks in it. Underneath each blank is a kind of word to fill in: a verb, noun, adverb, or adjective. You're not allowed to read the story until you've filled in all of the blanks. Let's try it with this one:

She opened the _____ (noun) and exclaimed _____ (adverb) at the top of her lungs: "Don't _____ (verb) in there, there's a _____ (adjective) _____ (noun)!"

It's fun isn't it? Mad Libs is great because it unleashes our creativity, and always ends with something totally unexpected, and often hilarious.

Let's try Mad Libs with one of the verses from today's gospel lesson (Matthew 21:38):

"when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come let us _____ (verb) him and _____ (verb) his inheritance.'"

What action words would you fill in to those two blanks? They can be anything you want, anything you can dream up? What if we were to use the words “welcome” and “share”? “let us welcome him and share his inheritance”. That seems like a good fit, doesn’t it? Or, what if we used “trust” and “split” “let us trust him and split his inheritance” That might work just as well, too. Or, if we really wanted to be creative, we might use “laugh” and “spend”. “let us laugh and spend his inheritance”. When I really think of it, any of these options might sound good to God. They all might make for a good story, too!

Now, let’s look at what the original says:

“when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come let us *kill* him and *get* his inheritance.’”

That’s not nearly as fun. I would bet it also probably doesn’t sound all that good to God, either. And yet, that’s the story, the parable that Jesus tells in today’s lesson. It’s a parable about conquering, destroying, tearing down, in the hopes of getting something. If it were a game of Mad Libs, no one would be laughing at the outcome, least of all God. And yet, when you think about the world we live in, the idea of conquering as a means to accumulation is pretty common. One corporation conquers a market, destroys their competition, and accumulates profit. One team destroys their opponent, defeats their competition, and gains victory. One person tears down another, and wins the argument. One thing that all of these things have in common, is that it’s not much fun when you’re the one who gets conquered, torn down, or defeated.

God looks at our lives, our world, and sees the words that we’ve chosen to insert into the dialogue of life. God must notice that many of the action words are words like these. In fact, Jesus uses them as he speaks to people. Words like “thirst” and “hunger”. Words like “demand” and “strive”. Jesus knows that many of these words can lead us to others, like “mammon” and “emptiness”, even though we use them as means to find something else: “fulfillment”.

God is playing a game of spiritual Mad Libs with our world, taking out words that we fit into the paragraphs of our lives, and replacing them with other words. God’s choices may seem as strange to us at times as the ones that we insert into the blanks on the pages of our Mad Libs booklets. I’m thinking of words like “forgiveness” and “grace”. And others, like “faith” and “hope”. The one that God writes most often is the word “love” What might happen if the tenants in the vineyard substituted “love” for “kill”? if that happened, we would read a totally different story than the one we’ve just heard.

This is what God does. God substitutes love for all of those other conquering, grasping, destroying words. God does it by first substituting His Son for us. The tenants in the vineyard wind up losing the lease and maybe more because they couldn’t think of anything better to write into the story of their lives than “kill” and “get”. In Jesus, God

gives us something to write into the story of our lives. In Jesus, God gives us love. In this story, even though the Son is torn down, even though the cross is raised, love writes the final chapter. Jesus gives of himself, substituting the full presence of God, for everything in our world that tears down, defeats, and kills. If it were a game of Mad Libs, God could write anything into that space: a flood, fire and brimstone, plagues of every variety. Instead, God writes a Son into it, and gives us a new story to read and live. One that is much more fun than the story of the tenants and the vineyard.

Your life is full of empty spaces, ready to be filled in with anything you choose to write. Mad Libs is most fun when we write the most creative things we can think of. Life is most meaningful when we give the world something worth reading, something of ourselves that comes from the gift of love that was given to us by the Author of Creation. The page is there before you, what will you give to the story of God's love, waiting to be read today? What will you add to the story?

Sunday October 9

Stand With Others

Matthew 22:1-14

Isaiah 25:1-9

Philippians 4:1-9

"Dress-Up"

I have some friends, who when planning their wedding, did something unusual. There, on the invitations that they mailed to each of their guests, they wrote "Halloween Wedding". The dress code for this wedding was that of a Halloween party. You should see their wedding photos! Frankenstein and his bride were there. Batman and Batgirl showed up. There were clowns and witches on the dancefloor, and pirates and golfers at the bar. Someone dressed as Jesus even showed up! It was a great party.

I'll bet that some of the invited guests, when they got their invitations, couldn't believe what they were reading. They might have wondered if the bride and groom were serious about it. They might have asked themselves "Can they really do this?" and then, shortly after asked "Can I really do this?" At that wedding, if you showed up in a jacket and tie, or your nicest dress, you would have felt out of place.

It's fun to play dress-up. To put on clothes that aren't yours and pretend that you're someone else for awhile. If you know how to play this game right, you will find that you have the ability to be anything and anywhere you want to be. You could become a cowboy, out on the range, sleeping under the stars and roping cattle. You might turn into a princess, living in a castle in a faraway land. Maybe those dress up clothes take

you to the moon when you put them on. Maybe life becomes a little more exciting when you trade your regular clothes for costumes!

Jesus tells the story of a wedding banquet that was given by a king. From what I understand about weddings in Jesus' time, the dress code was simple: wedding robes. Back then you didn't have to worry about which jacket or tie to wear, what color dress to choose. What makes this even better, is that if you didn't own a wedding robe, one would be provided for you. At the door, before you enter the banquet someone would size you up, hand you a robe, and then you were free to eat and dance, and enjoy the festivities. When you think about it, the wedding banquet was one great big game of "dress-up"!

In Jesus story, though, there is one guest who refuses to play by these rules. Maybe he's never done this before, traded his clothes for someone else's. Maybe he's too comfortable in his own robe to switch it out for the one at the door. Or, maybe, he's like a lot of people who have never played dress-up before, he's scared. There is one rule to any game of dress-up: if you're going to play, you have to change. For many people, change is scary. Unfortunately, it's not just a part of this game, it's a fact of life.

The king who throws the wedding knows that change is a fact of life. The wedding banquet he's throwing reminds him of it. When the invited guests are too busy, or too apathetic to come, he changes the rules. He changes the guest list. He changes his focus. He sends his people into the streets, to invite anyone who will come to join him for this special event. I think he does this because he knows that a party with no guests isn't any fun. This day, for him, is a joyful one. He wants to celebrate, and anyone willing to join him for it is welcome to come. On that day, he learned the joy of standing with others. I'll bet it changed his life. When the ones he invited initially won't show up, he invites others to join him. I'll bet it was quite a day!

In Jesus, God shows us the joy of dressing up. God leaves the comfort of heaven, puts on our clothes, walks in our shoes, and lives with us. Throughout his life, in his regular clothes, Jesus stands with all kinds of people. When he did, it changed their lives. Jesus stood with them when others wouldn't. Jesus stood with them when others told them that the presence of God would never dare to come and meet them.

At the end of his life, Jesus was given other clothes to wear, in a game of dress-up that was no fun at all. They gave him a purple robe and a crown of thorns, and mocked him as they called him "king". The amazing thing is, he wore them. He willingly put on these clothes, even though it was painful. They thought it was funny, dressing him up like a king. Jesus knew better. He was dressing up, not as the king they thought he was mimicking, but as the suffering servant that he was. Then, as he had done in life, he stood with others on the cross-two people that most everyone thought God wouldn't be caught dead with.

As he went to the cross, he was preparing a banquet for all of us. A banquet where, just like the one in his story, each of us would be fitted for new clothes. One that would be festive and joyful. One that we would attend for eternity. Jesus dresses us up with his life, death, and resurrection-fitting us for new clothes that are marked by his love.

We wear the cross, and we become people who go to amazing places, and do amazing things. We wear the cross, and we learn to stand with others, just like Jesus did. We wear the cross, wherever we go-at the weddings and the funerals, the parties and the wakes. We wear the cross and we stand with those who have no one else to stand beside, at the protests, in the doctor's office, at the hearing, in the cell. We wear the cross, and we stand with others, because God's love has called us there to love the others, to serve them, and to be dressed for the occasion when we do.

Sunday October 16

Embrace Change and Diversity

Matthew 22:15-22

Isaiah 45:1-7

I Thessalonians 1:1-10

"Would you rather...?"

Have you ever played the game "Would you rather...?" If you have, then you know how challenging it can be, but also how fun it is. If you haven't, then you're missing out. The whole game revolves around asking the question: "Would you rather..?" and then offering two options to choose from. For example, here are some great "Would you rather..?" questions:

Would you rather always have to wear earmuffs or a nose plug?

Would you rather be able to stop time or fly?

Would you rather be the most popular or the smartest person you know?

Would you rather always lose or never play?

Would you rather be a giant hamster or a tiny rhino?

The fun part about the game lies in thinking about which option you would rather have to do, or live with. It can be challenging, but it can also be incredibly entertaining. How about this one:

Would you rather embrace change and diversity or hug a cactus for an hour every day?

Surprisingly, many people choose the cactus over the change and diversity. Even those who don't often think long and hard about which option they would rather have to do.

The Pharisees are the cactus-huggers of the Bible. And, if they had it their way, they would probably much rather keep hugging cactuses than have to deal with all of the change that Jesus brings into their world. They see Jesus eating with a diverse group of people, and wonder “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” They bump into him on the Sabbath, plucking and eating wheat as he walks through a field with his friends, and it troubles them because you just don’t do something like that on the holiest day of the week. Jesus heals people, they get upset. Jesus calls people who are different from them, and they get bent out of shape. Jesus opens God’s love up to the world, and they just can’t stand it. All of the changes that he brings with him are too much for them to deal with. The diverse crowds of people that follow him and meet him at the table make the Pharisees bristle.

Their answer to all of this change is to try to play a game of “Would you rather...?” With Jesus. “Would you rather pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” What we learn from this lesson is that “Would you rather..?” just might be the only game God is not willing to play with us.

“Would you rather...?” is all about trapping someone between two different things, and forcing them to choose just one. The Pharisees hope that the way that Jesus answers their question, will say something about himself to the world. If he says “Pay taxes” then he’s showing his allegiance to someone other than God. If he says “don’t pay them”, then he’s a criminal, a tax evader. “Would you rather..?” is a game of painting people into corners and leaving them with no good options. Unfortunately, for the Pharisees, God cannot and will not, be trapped by us.

The details of Jesus’ answer mean less than what it does to the people who ask the question. After he responds, we’re told that *“they were amazed, and they left him and went away.”* You’ve met people like this. People who, when you refuse to play their game, by their rules, pack up their toys and go home. The funny thing is, that Jesus is playing their game. By refusing to be trapped by them, he’s essentially asking: “Would you rather hug cactuses, or would you rather know the real me?” It’s too bad they won’t play along, because they may have learned that embracing change is far less painful than they think.

Are you afraid of change? Would you rather live a predictable life of routine than change? I’m guessing if you’re like most people you would. Change is difficult. It means playing a game of “Would you rather..?” Even if your doctor tells you that you need to change your diet, it’s not going to change your response to the question: “Would you rather eat broccoli or chocolate cake?” Just because your spouse asks you to do something in the middle of tie ball game, doesn’t mean that the answer to the question “Would you rather take out the trash or watch the Sox?” is going to change. Although, if you don’t take out the trash, there may be another question coming: “Would you rather sleep on the couch or in the doghouse?”

We play this game in church, too. Would you rather keep singing out of the (original) Red Book or switch to the (cranberry) ELW? Would you rather build a gate around the parking lot or let the kids from the neighborhood skateboard there? Would you rather put red or green carpeting in the sanctuary? (Anyone who has ever played the game knows that there is no easy answer to that one!)

The problem with this, is that when we play this game, we play it with our fears about change and diversity in mind, and the questions begin to define us. Would you rather be a living church, speaking in diverse languages and expressions, or would you rather die a slow death?

When God plays this game, the questions-although they might fill us with fear and send us running for the cactuses-will lead us to new life. Jesus healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath once. It was another event that irked the Pharisees. What do you think the man would have said if Jesus had asked him “Would you rather be healed today, or do you want to wait until tomorrow?” The answer was clear, and because of it Jesus did what mattered for the man right then and there.

When we play along with God, we will inevitably find out that embracing change isn’t really all that bad. In fact, we do it all the time. We do it because “Would you rather..?” is a game that God really knows how to play. Would you rather continue to struggle, or would you like my help? “Would you rather carry all of that alone, or would you like me to take some of it for you?” “Would you rather carry this cross, or should I?” These are changes we will gladly embrace. The truth is, they aren’t any different than the changes that God always presents us with because they all lead to new life.

Try playing a game of “Would you rather..?” for just a week, and discover all the things that Jesus can do when you embrace the changes that he brings, and the diversity that he celebrates. If it doesn’t seem to work for you, you can always go back to the cactus.

Sunday October 23

Make Room for Joy

Matthew 22:34-46

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18

I Thessalonians 2:1-8

“Monopoly”

Let’s play a game of Monopoly together. But before, we start, I think we should go over the rules. Which rules do you follow? Monopoly seems to be one of those games in which participants create some of their own rules. For example, when a player rolls “doubles” on the dice three times in a row, do you send them to jail? Will we begin the game with a \$500 bill in the middle of the board, and then add all of the extra “luxury

tax” fines to it as the game goes on? Then, when someone lands on the “free parking” space, do they get all of that money in the middle? When my family plays Monopoly, we follow these rules, and more. When we play, if a player rolls snake eyes, he gets one of every bill from the banker. Monopoly is a great game because while there are rules written in the box, there is plenty of room to create new ones-that enhance the experience, that add some excitement, that make the game more fun.

Part of going where love calls and serving where love leads is remembering to leave room along the way for the unexpected.

The Pharisee’s in Jesus’ time probably weren’t the kind of people who would be thrilled with making “free parking” a windfall for the person who landed there-because that rule isn’t in the book. They probably would cringe at the idea of someone replenishing their bank account just for rolling snake eyes-because that rule also isn’t in the book. The one rule they might get excited about is the one about how someone goes to jail for rolling doubles three times, because that rule is in the book. The Pharisees knew the “book” of the law frontwards and backwards, and for them it was the embodiment of what God commands of us. For them, there may have been some room for interpretation, but if there was, there wasn’t a lot of it!

In today’s gospel, some Pharisees ask Jesus about what’s in the book, and which part of it, to him, is the “greatest”. Their question, by its very nature, allows for just one choice. There is no room for expansion or discussion-which ONE of these commandments is the best one? It would be like asking which rule from the game of Monopoly makes the game the best. They ask this question, because the rules-as they are written in the book are important to them. Maybe more important than anything else in life. For them, God lives in the rules, and all of them can be read, word-for-word, in the book.

I think Jesus may have been more like you and I, assuming you’re the kind of person who likes to add rules to the game of Monopoly. He may have enjoyed talking about the rules and working with them to make the game come to life in new ways. I’ll bet he was the kind of person who would have been overjoyed to see someone land on “Free Parking” or roll snake eyes, just to see the look on their face as they reached across the board and took the money, counted it and (maybe even thanked God for it) because it meant they lived to roll the dice again. Because, when you think about it-Free Parking-for the person who is nearly bankrupt, can be a lifesaver. It’s like a moment of grace, when nearly all of your properties are mortgaged, and your opponent s are putting up more houses and hotels all around the board.

I think Jesus may have liked this because he knew what it was like to live within rules that don’t give life. He and his disciples were once blasted for picking grain on the Sabbath as they walked through a field of wheat. Their hunger was no excuse, from the point of view of their accusers, for breaking one of the rules. Jesus was once raked over the coals for healing a man on the Sabbath. The fact that the man’s life was changed

forever that day was no reason to celebrate because, to them, it came at the cost of disobeying a commandment. For them, there was no room for any of these activities, doing them is simply not allowed-it's in the book.

Jesus breaks the rules of their discussion, and rather than choosing one commandment out of ten (or 613, depending upon who you ask), he offers them two great options.

The first, the clear frontrunner, is the one we find written in the first three commandments: *"Love God with every bit of who you are."* The second, which Jesus reminds them is "like it" involves what the other seven point to: *"love your neighbor as yourself."* The funny thing, is Jesus isn't writing new commandments, instead he's making room for what God has spoken time and time again. In Leviticus God spells it out, saying: *"You shall be holy, for I your Lord and God am holy."* And then, later on: *"love your neighbor as yourself"*. To that last bit God adds four simple, but powerful words: *"I am the Lord."* God's mandate for us is to live as God's people-people who live for God with everything that we have. At the same time, God invites us into a partnership of "holy" things-living as God does-and loving the people around us because God loves them, too.

Every time Jesus makes room within the rules that are written in the book-whether he's plucking grain on the Sabbath or healing a man with a withered hand, he's making room in this world for the greatest of commandments: loving God and loving others. The hungry disciples are fed because God provides food. This nourishment doesn't break the Sabbath, but instead provides room for the holy joy of God to break into it. Can you imagine the joy that the man with the withered hand must have carried with him out of the synagogue that day? There was room for that joy because the holy presence of God in the flesh was there to heal him. The rule in the book may have been broken, but the man was made whole.

On Good Friday, every rule in the book was re-written. It was the only time in history that God died, God was defeated. They rolled dice for his clothes, and dressed him up like a king. They sent him to jail, maybe because he had rolled the dice too many times, piling up too many offenses along the way, and provided too much evidence that the rules written in the book didn't apply to him. From the perspective of the ones who sent him to the cross, this was the fulfillment of everything that book said about commandments and what happens when you break them. The funny thing is, from God's perspective the same thing was true. Jesus' death was the fulfillment of everything that's been written in the book, and it's the penalty not for all those times that he broke the rules-but all the times that we did. The amazing thing is, that somewhere, in the tomb where they laid him there must have been a square on the floor marked with the words "Free Parking" because instead of bankrupting the world of the presence of God, the cross opened the door to a windfall of God's grace. It had been there all along, sitting right in the middle of the board, and when the stone was rolled away it emerged to shouts of alleluia. That day God changed the rules about life

and death forever, and made room in the shadow of death for a new life that would mark every bit of who we are.

Going where love leads and serving where love calls will open up spaces in our life together that will be filled with God's joy. This will only happen if we make room for it. As the Pharisees' witness reminds us, it is easy to stick to the rules that are written in the book, but if that's all there is, then there's little room for joy. When we make room for the unexpected trips to free parking, and the lucky rolls of the dice that bring us back from the dead, we are experiencing a holy sense of joy that God can bless-and I'll bet God can share with us! If you're still not sure, that's ok, you can check it out for yourself, it's all written in the book!

Sunday October 30

**God's purpose for the New England Synod:
To go where love leads
To serve where love calls**

John 8:31-36

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Romans 3:19-28

"Charades"

One word. Two syllables. First syllable, sounds like "geez". Second syllable sounds like "us". If we were playing charades, you'd have the answer by now, wouldn't you? Of course, there's no way to capture a game of charades with words on a page. The entire game revolves around not using words at all, but instead letting your actions speak for themselves. It's all about communicating something to those who are playing with you without ever speaking a single word. At times, it's challenging. Most of the time, it's a lot of fun.

My family loves to play charades. Here's how we do it: we pass out slips of paper to everyone who wants to play, and then we all write down the things we'd like to see the others act out. Then, we put them all into a hat and each player has to act out what's written on the slip of paper that they choose. We try to be incredibly creative, and the goal is always the same-the harder the word or phrase, the better. My all-time favorite was one that my sister wrote down a couple of years ago: "*Chocolate bread pudding with lemon sauce.*" Believe it, or not, someone in my family acted it out, and someone else guessed it!

All of the slips of paper that we gathered throughout the first year of the "Doing What Matters" went into a big hat. We compiled them, and then shared them with a group of

leaders from around the Synod and asked them to pray about what they read. We asked them to talk about what the members of churches all over our Synod were saying when they listened for what God was up to. What came out of it is our purpose statement and guiding principles. *“God’s purpose for the New England Synod is to go where love leads, serve where love calls.”* Our guiding principles call us to: pray always, give of ourselves, stand with others, embrace change and diversity, and make room for joy. What would happen if we put all of these things in a hat, and played a lively game of charades with them? I think God might like that. What would God think if, all of a sudden we weren’t just talking about this purpose and these principles, and instead we were living them out? It would definitely present some unique challenges and opportunities for us. I think it also might be a lot of fun for us. If we believe that God was up to something in the formation of this statement, then we have to believe that this is what God would like to see us doing.

Possibly, the only problem with this is that it can be scary to play charades. Unless you are extremely extroverted, it can be intimidating to stand in front of a group of people, with all of their eyes on you. If the thought of doing something like that among your family and friends seems a little scary, then imagine doing it in front of the whole world! Maybe this is why it seems much easier to sit in church basements and fellowship halls and scribble all of those things down on sticky notes. When you think about it, praying always and giving of ourselves seem like great ideas when we’re talking about them. Standing with others and embracing change and diversity seem like real possibilities when we’re at the table, sharing a meal. Who wouldn’t want to make room for more joy in their life, right? It’s tougher to reach into the hat, grab one of those principles, and think about venturing beyond the familiar walls of the church, to do those things out in the world. When we think about making that leap, maybe we start to experience a little bit of fear. Pretty soon, familiar phrases, like: “We’ve never done it that way before” start popping into the hat, and we find that we’re much more comfortable acting out those ones.

Jesus speaks to people like you and I in today’s lesson from John’s gospel. He talks to them about freedom. And like you and I, they might be surprised to find out that they are not completely free. Maybe they were well-versed in all of those comfortable phrases that congregations have written into their vocabulary and act out all the time. Phrases like: “We’ve never done it that way before.” Or “What will so-and-so think? She donated that _____ (fill in the blank) so we don’t dare change it.” Maybe they too, like you and I, had gotten into heated debates about the color of the carpet or the sanctuary walls, or the placement of the baptismal font, and thought that they were free to do whatever they chose. Maybe they were like us, and when they gathered together they knew that they needed to do something, and they longed for that something to matter, but there was only one problem-they had never understood how enslaved they had become. Maybe they were like us, living under an illusion of freedom, but all the while slaves to the past, or tradition, or the ways we’ve always done it. Maybe they were like us, slaves to the misguided idea that they were running

this show. Maybe they hadn't realized, until Jesus showed up, that their worship had become more like a game of charades than life with God. Maybe we are like they were. We're able to sit and talk about all kinds of things, and we believe that we are free to do all of them. Maybe we make the mistake of thinking that the talking is the same as doing. Maybe we proclaim freedom to serve and go where God's love leads, but when God watches our movements, our motions, and our activities, they all say otherwise.

I think the Reformation happened because the church had been playing charades for too long, and making the motions, the actions, too important and too difficult. I think God agreed. Today, as we do on this Sunday at the end of October each year, we gather together to celebrate the fact that our fears, our reluctance, our hesitation, aren't running the show. God is.

Jesus' prescription for tearing the lid off of secrets that keep us enslaved to fear, and his escape plan from thinking that we run the show is found in just one word from this lesson: "continue". The word in the original language of the text is the same as our word for "remain" or "stay". Jesus invites us, when life, or church, or communication becomes like a game of charades, where we are just guessing at what might be best, to stay with him. I think he invites us each day to look to him: his motions, his activities, his presence, and take all of our cues from these things. When we continue along the way that he set out for us, the way that is him, he promises: we *will* be made free.

We are free, ironically, to do things the way we've always done them-and remain enslaved to fears, or unending discussions that never lead to action, or to mistaking things like the color of carpeting for more important actions. If we choose to continue along this way, we will find that there are no permanent homes. And pretty soon, the fears that may have at one time been a myth-fears of closing the doors forever-will wind up to be true. At the same time, we are free to do what God's people have always done-to look to God, the author, the creator, the one whose actions are worth paying attention to. When God runs the show, we go to incredible places and we serve in amazing ventures, together.

How do we stop playing charades with one another? How can we let down our guard enough to let our actions speak louder than our words? Where are the places where we can name our true fears, and then come together to hand them over to God? This life together was meant to be more than confusing motions, meaningless activities, and hollow actions that the world is left bewildered by.

When it comes to the action that matters the most, we are drawn to stay with Jesus-on the way to the cross. How can we act out the cross in our daily lives, as laypeople and pastors, as congregations and communities? What can we do to make sure people don't have to guess what it means to follow Jesus? Where does the cross, and the love that made it possible, call us to go, and what do we do when we get there? How can we live together so that our lives are about going where God's love leads us, and serving

where God's love calls us? There is a hat full of options in front of you, a vibrant collection of exciting activities that will lead you where God's love is calling, and strengthen you to serve when you get there. Don't be afraid to reach in, grab a scrap of paper, and let your actions-praying always, giving of yourself, standing with others, embracing change and diversity, and making room for joy. The world is watching, and God is too. You are free to let your actions tell the story of his love:

One word. Two syllables. First syllable, sounds like "geez". Second syllable sounds like "us".