

The Church and the Games We Play

Romans 12:11

September 27, 2009

Lin Grace Rohr

How many of you like to play games? What are some of your favorites? I heard a great “game story” this week on the news. There was a group of police officers in Florida who got “caught up” in the love of a game; and then got “caught” for it! Now this is a true story. These officers went into a house on a drug raid, and apparently got distracted...by a Wii game of bowling. Does everyone know what a Wii game is? It’s an interactive computerized game you can play on your TV. Now I’ve never played a Wii game, I understand they’re a lot of fun...but these on-duty police officers played Wii bowling for nine hours! All caught on camera! Games are fun but...come on!

Now there’s one game that I’ve never found to be very fun; that game is tug-of-war. As a child I couldn’t see the fun in holding onto a rope and pulling with all your might, until the others fell on the ground on your side of some imaginary line scraping their knees, or worse you got pulled to their side...scraping your knees! What’s the fun in that...no one’s ever convinced me which is why I am drawn to a 20th century theologian’s comment. Reinhold Niebuhr said “that our whole lives can be seen as a tug-of-war between the need to recognize our limits and the need to actualize our possibilities,” in theological terms, what Calvin called “double grace”: justification and sanctification. When I mentioned this in worship planning, Steve Roylton, who’s always looking out for our teens, gave me a quizzical look: Really Lin? I realize that some may find these words archaic, words that don’t seem to make a difference in our lives, and others may find them boring because you already know what they mean, but recognizing that “tug” in the room, let’s pull out their relevance for us today.

Whether we name it as “justification and sanctification” or not, the tug-of-war can be seen in the Church, with capital C, as well as in most individual congregations. Calvin explained his “double grace” this way, and I am summarizing it: justification is the grace of being made righteous once and for all. This is the grace of forgiveness for our sins; the grace of being brought into relationship with God through Christ. The second grace, sanctification, is a process...being made righteous throughout our lifetime. Another theologian defines it much more elegantly: “Justification is the act of God’s free grace by which we are accepted as righteous in God’s sight based on the righteousness of Christ being attributed to us by grace. Sanctification is a corresponding act of God’s free grace by which God enables us to experience regeneration, namely, to die to sin, live unto righteousness, and be renewed in the image of Jesus Christ. Both, being forgiven (justification) and being renewed (sanctification) are part of the same action of God’s grace.”¹ Now if that’s too much for you to get your head around, how about the poet Maya Angelou’s reference: “You’re a Christian....already?”

These differences of experiencing grace, in one way or another is what has led to the church’s game of “tug-of-war.” Think about it...on the extremes. The fundamentalist churches emphasize making a personal commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior; accepting God’s grace for the forgiveness of sins; justification. The progressive churches emphasize service, witnessing to God’s grace by serving the world; sanctification. This tug-of-war has been going on for a lot

longer than the time Niebuhr named it in the mid-twentieth century, it's been going on a lot longer than the time of the Protestant Reformation; it's been going on since the beginning of the church in the first century! We can hear evidence of it in Scripture. For example, we have Romans 3:24 and 28 "justified by God's grace as a gift, we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works..." tugging against James 2:17; "so faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead." Throughout the centuries; one side, and then the other, has won the war, leaving the other side wounded.

How can we do it differently? I believe our text today gives us the rules of playing a different game. You may remember that this section of Scripture that we're using for our fall series on "Grace Happens," has been called the "Marks of a True Christian." Last week we looked at the verse, "let love be genuine." Noting that the word translated as genuine actually means "without hypocrisy." All the admonitions that Paul then gives are based on that foundation of genuine love. So it is with today's verse, "Do not lag in zeal. Be ardent in spirit. Serve the Lord." These actions are not a moral or ethical list of a way to be in the world, they are response to God's grace in our lives. These actions are to be done with the right attitude, without hypocrisy; with genuine love. Zeal and enthusiasm in the spirit are to drive our desire to serve the Lord.

Let's take a look at "Serve the Lord." As we have said, there are churches that don't emphasize service...they would focus on the attitude of genuine love, and there are churches that would focus on the action of serving, but one without the other...fails to be what Paul was convinced to be, the life of a true disciple...the definition of a church! Our attitudes guide our actions, and our actions reflect our attitudes! And this "tug-of-war" is not only evident in different churches but also in the life of most congregations. No one side has a monopoly on the right way...so let's pass go...and with the help of our Romans text, collect some perspectives.

At times, in the life of a congregation, the emphasis pulls to a personal relationship with God [justification] and at other times, the emphasis pulls in the other direction to service [sanctification]. The problem is that in this "tug-of-war" one side or the other always gets wounded. If we keep pulling others to deepen their discipleship without an expression of gratitude for the love of God we will be less than we are meant to be. Our service is fed by our love for God overflowing in a zealous, enthusiastic way! The Greek word translated "ardent" means "boiling over." Our love for God boils over in us so that we serve God from an abundance of love. Or if we keep pulling others to serve without that love relationship with God, if we rely on our own strength, our own resources, our own moral or ethical conviction that serving others is the right thing to do, if we are motivated by guilt, or despair, or something else other than love, we may serve and it will help others, but it will not be complete in the definition of what Paul is talking about when he talks about service. The Greek word for service is defined as "a humble, grateful ministry. In the church, we respond to God's grace, embracing our diverse gifts, offering those gifts in genuine love serving the world...the world that God loves!

But sometimes, just like those police officers playing Wii bowling when they knew better, we get caught up in the love of the game. We may put down the justification/sanctification tug-of-war rope; only to pick up the one right next to it; what world do we serve? Each of us lining up on the side we prefer; on the one side ~ those for service in the world at home, our own church,

our own community pulling against those for service in the world abroad. In this too, one side or the other, gets wounded. Tug-of-war really isn't much fun! It's time for a new game!

Let's try hide and seek! The mysteries of God; the abundance of grace, double, triple, quadruple, multiple...are hidden, but in faith, individually and together, we can seek them, recognizing our limits and embracing our possibilities, and then in gratitude for God's gracious love, we can serve the world, at home...and abroad! Amen!

1. Johnson, William Stacy. John Calvin, Reformer for the 21st Century Westminster John Knox Press 2009