

What Game Are We Playing and What Are The Rules?

Among the first things my spiritual teacher said to me decades ago were these:

“I want you to be able clearly to discern the difference between the various roles you play in life and the person you really are. That’s not you sitting there. This is not me sitting here.” That got my attention.

Another thing he said early on was: “Life is a game. The first rule of which is - this is not a game.”

My goal for today is that by the time this talk is over both of those fundamental life principles make more sense to you.

He also said, in our very first session, “My goal is to knock you off the path. Your goal is to get back on. Our goal is to talk about this.”

I wouldn’t describe either myself or my teaching as having the goal of knocking people off of the path. My style is to surprise people, to give people another or different way of looking at things.

My office is is full of things designed to be gently provocative.

For example, there is a small, but very obvious, framed picture of a bird that is in a cage that isn’t a cage. The artist entitled it “prison.” The bird is gripping so tightly the two bars in front of him that he fails to notice that they are the only two bars that make up the cage.

Or, there is the rock that sits on the table in the middle of the room that has carved into it the words “nothing is written in stone.”

I have a huge print of Magritte’s “Empire of Light.” It looks more like a photograph than a painting. A bright Spring-like day at the top and a rainy night scene at the bottom.

There is a sculpture on the table that looked at from one angle is a clown and from another a ballerina.

There is another table by the window that has a dozen kaleidoscopes on it. Another symbol, to me, of broken pieces of glass coming together to make a beautiful pattern.

In addition to having a Karl Jung action figure, I have two plaques that have quotes by Jung.

On the action figure are the words: "Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves."

One plaque says, "Who looks outside dreams. Who looks inside awakens."

Then the one he had in his study and which is also the inscription on his tombstone. It is usually translated, "Invited or not invited, God is present."

I think of these things as silent invitations to take another step deeper into territory not yet explored and it is always absolutely fascinating to me when people notice them. Now that you know about them, they will be the first things you look for when you come into the office. The bird in the cage was a gift to me from Sherry over thirty-five years ago. It has been with me in now five different office locations. Occasionally someone whom I have been seeing for some considerable period of time will say something like, "I like that picture of the bird in the cage that isn't a cage. You just get that?" In fact it has been right in front of them for many sessions by this time.

Jesus was much more deliberately provocative than this.

I have been basing the talks I've been offering in here on questions that Jesus asked. I decided to do this about a year ago because I wanted some sort of structure to follow and I had been intrigued by something I first heard Richard Rohr say several years ago. He pointed out the fact that though Jesus is asked a lot of questions in the accounts we have in the Christian Testament, almost two hundred questions all together, he answers only one of them. Whereas he himself asks over

two hundred questions. One of the major ways he taught was by asking questions that were meant to reposition people, to reveal their hypocrisy.

I'm not sure this number of questions asked by either Jesus or those who heard him stands up to scholarship. I'm not disputing the fact that Jesus didn't answer questions or that he asked a lot. But, we really don't know the number. You have to be a biblical literalist to say that and, even then, do you count repetitions? I've gone back and re-read the Jesus narratives just with the intention of paying attention to the questions. The questions in the Gospel of John are different than in the Gospel of Mark. And, Matthew and Luke have Mark's questions but sometimes in a different order. So, my selection of the questions is arbitrary. I've generally been following the questions as they come up in Mark's telling of the Jesus story and when I got to the one that we are going to look at today, I nearly skipped over it.

Last week, I hope you remember, we talked about the moral obligation to be happy. But, when I went back to really study and reflect on the context in which the question, actually questions, I want us to look at today are found, I personally found this passage to be so engaging and rich that now I wonder if I can do it justice in this one time or not. At least doing that reading and study changed my mind completely about thinking this might just be skipped over.

One of my goals is to contribute to religious literacy, especially in the Christian tradition. I know this may or may not be your cup of tea but since the most vocal and loudest of the voices coming from the "Christian church" are about as far from the real teachings of Jesus as you can get, I think it is important to do this.

As you will see, the ability to distort and misuse the teachings of Jesus that is so prevalent in our time is something that began happening within a matter of a few years after his death. I hope to show more about this process as we go forward today. And, I promise not to spend too much time on the biblical literacy stuff.

Here is the text from Mark's version in which the question, or questions, we are looking at today are to be found:

One Sabbath day he was walking through a field of ripe grain. As his disciples made a path, they pulled off heads of grain. The Pharisees told on them to Jesus: “Look, your disciples are breaking Sabbath rules!”

Jesus said, “Really? Haven’t you ever read what David did when he was hungry, along with those who were with him? How he entered the sanctuary and ate fresh bread off the altar, with the Chief Priest Abiathar right there watching—holy bread that no one but priests were allowed to eat—and handed it out to his companions?” Then Jesus said, “The Sabbath was made to serve us; we weren’t made to serve the Sabbath. The Son of Man is no lackey to the Sabbath. He’s in charge!”

I hope you remember that in the scene just before this Jesus and his disciples are criticized because they do not fast. John’s disciples fasted. The Jews fasted. Jesus did not fast and neither did his first followers. “How can you fast at a wedding feast?” he asked.

I used that to bolster my claim that we have a moral obligation to be happy.

The custom of the good, or law-abiding, Jew in that time was to fast twice a week. Jesus did not only not fast but he developed a reputation for being a “glutton and a drunk.”

Soon after the death of Jesus his followers, who were Jewish, reverted to their Jewish customs but with significant changes. They switched the fasting days from Mondays and Thursdays to Wednesdays and Fridays and they switched the day of Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday.

Scholars say that this process of assimilating the Jesus tradition to an earlier established custom is known as the domestication of the tradition. They also say that the only few words in this passage that came from Jesus are: “The Sabbath was made to serve us; we weren’t made to serve the Sabbath.”

Here Jesus gives a radical reinterpretation of the creation story. The dominion God gave to Adam and Eve in that story is extended to include the Sabbath. The phrase “Son of Man” simply means “member of the human race” and not some special

messianic title. Also, just to get as much biblical stuff in as possible, this teaching is found not only here in Mark but also in Luke and Matthew.

Jesus is changing the rules of the game. The questions he leaves with us in doing so are: What is the game we are playing? And, what are the rules of the game?

So what is the game we are playing and what are the rules? If we claim to be “Christian,” whatever that might mean to and for you, how does that influence the game you are playing with your life?

One of the things I’m trying to do with my life, and this is shaped by my identity as a spiritual teacher, is that I want to make sense of the world in which I live by what I believe. And, at the same time, I want to make sense out of what I believe in light of what we are learning about the nature of the world in which we live.

I can tell you that the world in which I live is dramatically different than the one in which I lived when I was just graduating from the university. In some ways it really is different, it has changed. In some ways it is the same as it always was but we are learning more about it.

One of the most obvious changes is in communication and media. When I moved to Houston in 1966 we had only three television channels. One of the news anchors, Walter Cronkite, was considered “the most trusted man in America.” We believed that our democratic institutions were solid, trustworthy for the most part and would hold. Things are so much different now. What are called “news broadcasts” feel mostly like assaults to me. There are things shown on prime time commercial television that I can’t believe are shown. When it gets to non-commercial cable shows . . . I used to record and watch John Oliver’s “Last Week Tonight” but honestly the “f” word every other sentence is just too much.

Most of you do not remember this, you are too young. About the time I was ready to graduate from High School when the so-called communist menace was occupying the attention of one Joseph McCarthy, we watched while he decimated lives and ruined careers accusing people of being in some way affiliated with the communist party. Finally, one senator stood up to him saying in a televised public hearing, “Have you no sense of decency, sir?” There are a lot of people who get a

lot of attention I'd like to say that to. Have you no sense of decency, of what is right, fair, just?

While I have been thinking about and working on this talk, I overheard two men having a conversation about this country. One said to the other, in commenting about the leadership of our government, "You know, they don't care what the rules are. They are going to do what they can get away with." Is this our culture? Is this the game we are playing? Or, being used as pawns in?

Last Sunday after church a member came to up to me and gave me a copy of an article that appeared in the June issue of the Atlantic Monthly magazine. The feature article is titled "Abolish the Priesthood." On the cover the article is summarized by saying, "To save the Catholic Church, return it to the people." Returning either the church or the government to the people is not a good idea if the people have relinquished their responsibility to wake up, grow up and develop moral character and personal responsibility.

The article is heartbreaking. It chronicles the years long abuse of children, mostly young boys, by pedophile priests, abuse that went on for decades. The leadership of the church protected these priests by moving them from one parish, perhaps even to a different diocese. It was discovered that in one diocese the abusing priests would give the children they molested small crosses to wear telling them they were being rewarded for their faithfulness. In fact these priests were telling other priests that the children who wore these crosses were easy targets. These were the ones who, as the article puts it, "had been initiated."

The Catholic Church in particular and the Christian Church in general is the largest non-governmental organization on the planet. The virtues of Christianity have been obvious to me my entire life and I believe this world is better for those virtues being practiced around the world. I am grateful for the people, living and dead, who have brought them to life for me - Richard Rohr, James Finley, Joan Chittister, Thomas Merton, Julian of Norwich and on and on. And, the church, especially in this pedophile coverup has been the source of enormous evil and harm. People who have been told that they were sinful from their birth have experienced abuse at the hands of the church.

The Houston Chronicle has been running a series of articles on abuse by clergy within the Southern Baptist Churches. I have a better understanding now why and how the abuse occurred. If some people, especially men, are treated as if they are gods, some of them will eventually begin to believe it and act like it. What the women who reported their abuse were told by those they trusted to do something about it is appalling.

There is a disturbing article in the current online edition of the New Yorker about Jean Carroll who has accused our president of rape. That isn't what is disturbing, though it is. Nor is it the most disturbing thing that she is the 22nd woman to accuse him of sexual assault, though it is. What is most disturbing is more people aren't disturbed.

I am appalled also by how white evangelicals have allowed a narrow political agenda to define not only their religious identity but also their religious convictions. Though I never agreed with or liked the title, Evangelical Christians use to pride themselves on being the vanguard of what they called "the Moral Majority."

I personally am all in favor of women deciding how to deal with their bodies and not some older white male who has no capacity to know what it is like either to get pregnant or to have an abortion or to give birth. I saw a bumper sticker years ago that said, "If men could get pregnant, abortion would be a sacrament." I'm all for being pro-life if that stance includes as much concern for what happens to a child when it comes out of the womb as it does while it is inside.

Suicide is the leading cause of death among the population of people between 12 and 19 and has increased 30 percent in the last ten years. The social media explosion is partly responsible for this. A child used to get bullied by maybe one or two students at school. Now a child can be bullied by hundreds.

A very recent Gallup poll says that 55% of Americans describe themselves as stressed much of the day and 22% said they were angry much of the time. The poll ranked the United States as the seventh most stressed country in the world.

A just released study contributing to the climate change discussion, or lack thereof, says that we have covered the planet with so much plastic that researchers are finding particles of discarded, degraded plastic everywhere, even in our bodies. To quote from the study: “the plastic known as BPA is in the urine of 93 percent of people over the age of 6. It’s been found in breast milk. People ingest an average of 2,000 micro plastic particles a week through food, water and air - roughly the same amount of plastic in a credit card.”

Mass shooting occur in this country on an almost daily basis.

What or what not to do about the immigration issue is splitting the country down the middle.

Perhaps the scariest thing is the explicit rise of white nationalism, of racism in a country that has yet to come to terms with our original sin of slavery.

What’s the game? What are the rules?

I don’t want to imply that I have a solution to any of these problems. I don’t know what to do about the health care crisis, the opioid epidemic, the wealth disparity in this country, the immigration issue, the racial divide, climate change - any of it. Indeed, I don’t know what to do about so much that it is amazing I haven’t been elected to congress.

The relatively recent Chinese poet and philosopher Lin Yutang, by recent I mean he died in 1976 said, “It is not so much what you believe in that matters, as the way in which you believe it and proceed to translate that belief into action.” He also wrote, “When small men begin to cast big shadows, it means that the sun is about to set.”

We live in perilous times. In my humble opinion, we need a moral and spiritual awakening. To keep going in the direction we are going does not present us with a destination that any sane person really wants.

A Buddhist monk, a priest and a rabbi were attending an interfaith gathering. It was nighttime. All of a sudden the power goes out and, of course, so do the lights. The

Buddhist monk takes advantage of this to offer a teaching about using the dark to meditate. The priest gives a homily about how Jesus is the light of the world. The rabbi gets up and goes to find a flashlight.

Jesus was a Jew and much of his way of approaching life was like that. He does what is practical and what makes sense even if it goes against the rules and regulations, against the cultural expectation and religious laws of the time. That does not mean that there was not another set of rules that he was following.

Jesus, after he left John the Baptist and started out on his own, had a purpose and a passion. He was an itinerant who journeyed through the countryside trying to spread his teachings for and about a new world order. As such, he and his followers relied on what food they could find or were offered one day at a time, sometimes - as in this passage we are looking at today - harvesting grain by hand from the fields and eating it on the go.

Trust and belief are quite different from each other. What Jesus shows us in both his behavior and his teachings is a model of faith. Trust is an openness to the truth. Beliefs are important but if they keep us from walking in trust, they are hindrances to the spiritual life. This, is a summary of today's talk.

In making the transition to non-dual mind or unitive trust, which we don't directly do but open ourselves to, it usually means the loss of some cherished beliefs. Certainly it means the loss of certitude.

I keep reminding you that there is nothing in the culture we return to after these times together that support the kind of trust I'm talking about. Our culture is about big egos, not strong and functional ones. Narcissism rules our culture.

Rules are important because they determine how we act and how we act with each other determines the kind of future we will have. One of the genius aspects of Judaism is that the Jewish people knew this. Jesus was a Jew, remember. The Jewish faith began with the sense that any injustice that violates human possibility in the long run cannot prevail.

If you read the Jewish Scriptures, you will see how this passion for justice grew and expanded until it occupied all of life: every meal, every sexual act, every bird's nest, every prayer tassel, every homeless slave, every corpse. The Jewish conviction was that it all belonged to God, all had been invested with God's holiness. Therefore all must be guarded, attended to and honored. This is what gave rise to all the laws, all the rules, all the regulation. And one of them, one of the Big Ten, had to do with Sabbath.

Taken at the dualistic level this commandment meant exactly what it says. One day in seven was to be set aside to think about God and religious matters and to refrain from work.

You know as well as I that no law can make a person spiritual or give a person faith. No law can make you love another person. But, laws can stress the importance of justice.

In Jewish law everyone, including slaves, was to have a day off. Not just the so-called important people, or the rich. But, everybody. If you go back and read the law the critics of Jesus were so intent he and his disciples kept, you will see how comprehensive it reads:

“Neither your son, nor your daughter, nor your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor the stranger within your gate, shall do any work on the Sabbath.” What this law stresses is the sanctity of the individual. No one is left out.

This law is also about rest which is one of the principle requirements of genuine Self development.

But, it didn't stay that way. Principles became regulations, and law became legalism.

When the Jews, because of political repression, were driven in upon themselves, they started to study their own laws under a microscope. Worse, they began to be dissatisfied with principles and to insist upon rules and regulations to cover every conceivable event that might happen to a person.

Then came a passion for this fragmentation of principles into rules and regulations. Nowhere in the history of Jewish law is this more evident than in their understanding of what it meant to honor the Sabbath.

For example, you couldn't carry a burden on the Sabbath. What is a burden? Is a child a burden? No. So you could pick up a child on the Sabbath. You couldn't pick up a rock though because a rock was a burden. Nor could you pick up a child if the child was holding a rock. What, then, was the precise definition of a rock. And on and on and on it went.

It was the Scribes who carefully worked out these rules and regulations and the Pharisees who made sure they were carefully kept. The Pharisees in their criticism of Jesus are not being bad people. They are just doing their job. But, they had become religious sadists.

This is what happens any time religion focuses more on rules, right beliefs and correct behaviors, than it does on the principles of love, compassion and justice.

I personally see a perfect analogy between this and what is going on in the United Methodist Church over the full inclusion debate. Shall we honor rules and regulations or practice compassion and justice?

The rule keepers confronted Jesus for allowing his disciples to do something on the Sabbath they thought was not allowed. His response was not to dismiss or get rid of the law but to take it back to its original purpose. Over and over he says in his teaching, "You have heard it said," then he would cite the law, "but I say unto you," and then he would give his understanding. Here it is not the the Sabbath should be disregarded but understood as something that serves us, now we it.

What could this mean for us? How could this teaching inform our understanding of the rules by which we play the game we are supposed to be playing?

The foundation of personal and communal well-being is love, compassion and justice. Those are the rules we are to play by. But, these are not the rules that control our culture. Rather, what grabs our attention are matters like fear, doubt,

inadequacy, opposition, death. Our spiritual work lies in replacing these things with wiser and more useful truths.

I am growing more and more to believe that almost everybody knows what is right. I think that is an evolutionary truth. When we live lives that go contrary to what we know is true and right we become alienated from ourselves and then from others. And, we deal with that by becoming fragmented, numb and withdrawn.

The Sabbath was for remembering and when you look at the state of our world, it is clear that we have forgotten. We have culturally forgotten that our well-being depends on a social contract that knows we belong with and for and to each other and that we, along with everyone else on this planet, are bound together in a common destiny. We have forgotten that the things that concern us more, and which we most need for authentic life and living, cannot be privately controlled, so that the lucky and the blessed and the clever and the oppressive can monopolize at the expense of others. We have forgotten in our silly, mistaken individualism that we are indeed members of one another, and that care of each for all is required for our various worlds to work.

Look around and you will see that bad religion - that is, selfish piety, thin morality and private purity - will guarantee bad economics and bad politics. It results in an unworkable world driven by greed and fear and violence. This is why Jesus broke the law.

I'm not saying we don't have to play by the rules. We do. What I am saying is that the rules we have made up are not the ones to play by. The religious leaders went to Jesus and said, "Your guys are not playing by the rules." He said, "Really? I don't think you know what the rules really are. The rules of the game are - Love God. Love your neighbor."

This is the game we are called to play.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.