

Sermon Title: Players and Prayers
Text: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
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Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
Ash Wednesday

I had a chance to catch up on a little reading earlier this week, and one of the things I had a chance to look through were several older copies of a periodical by the name of *Context*, which is put together by Martin Marty as a sort of clipping bin of things he's read and found interesting. The article that caught my attention pointed to something that was published in *Harper's* magazine, not something that I often read. The original article was written by someone by the name of Garret Keizer, who wanted to share some thoughts on something of an *icon* in our modern world: *the player*.¹

You may not use that word, but you know what I'm talking about because they're all over the news...especially if you consider *People* magazine to be the news. The tragedy that surrounded the death of Anna Nicole Smith was the story of the demise of a *player*. When Brittany Spears showed up on news shows with a shaved head we watched, in part, because she's a player. And it's not just entertainment folk. Think of the Enron scandal, politicians caught up in their own lies, or for that matter high profile TV preachers who fall from grace. Each, in their own way, is what Keizer wanted us to think of when he talked about "players."

What defines them, Keizer says, is "the consciousness that he's different from ordinary people...the sense that he moves at a faster pace, on a different plane, and according to a different set of rules than those that govern an ordinary human being." I assume from Marty's summary of the article that it matters because we're living in a world in which it is "players" who increasingly control the "game."

This all made it into Marty's *religious* publication because Keizer noted that religion is yet one more arena in which players can play. They are, Keizer suggests, attracted by "promises of transcendence, exemption from death, consequence, chaos, whatever stands as an obstacle to his whims." The player *likes* religion in so far as it is one more card that can be played.

So, how can you tell a *religious* player? Keizer reduces it to a one-sentence affirmation of faith that is so familiar as to be trite: "I'm very spiritual, but I'm not religious at all." That, so says Keizer, is short hand for "I'm a religious player."

Think about it. Spiritual but not religious says I'm different from ordinary people...I don't need the rules that apply to them. My life is lived on a different plane, according to a different set of rules, and I understand things that ordinary people can't see it for themselves. *Gnosticism* is what it was called in the early centuries of Christianity—the persistent belief that what you find in Jesus is some secret knowledge that can unlock the treasures of the ages if you know the code. It's an idea every bit as pervasive today as it was in the centuries after Jesus, if I understand the fascination with things like *The Da Vinci Code*, and at least some forms of Pentecostalism that are sweeping around the world—unless you've *experienced* it for yourself, you just can't

¹ "Playing God", *Context*, September 2006, Part A (38:9). Published by Claretian Publications, Chicago, IL. For subscription information follow link to <http://www.contextonline.org/>

understand. Unless you know the password, or the right prayer, *you're* on the outside, and I'm *in*. I'm a *religious* player.

What does any of this have to do with Ash Wednesday, and these weeks ahead in which we will talk, in *religious* circles about Lent, and Fasts, and the *work* of preparing our hearts and lives for the mystery of the Passion? Let me give Keizer the floor again. “The most interesting kinds of religion, for my money, challenge the Gnostic pretensions of the player...Not for nothing is Jesus remembered as a carpenter, like the stonecutter Socrates. Both were markedly blue collar in their approach to wisdom. Introduce them to a player, and their natural inclination was to take him down a peg. Put him to work, in other words. ‘Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor...then come, follow me.’”

He goes on to point to Paul—a tent-maker—who told the church in Corinth what would have been obvious to all in the room: not many of them were wise, or powerful, or of noble birth. They weren't *players*, in other words. But that's okay, because Jesus was pretty clear: It is not so among you. He wasn't here to teach the players a few new tricks. He came that we might have *life*, and have it abundantly.

And nowhere is this truer than in this season into which we set sail this evening: Lent—the “Great Fast” as it is known in other traditions. Though the spirituality of the players won't let you in on the secret, Jesus is pretty clear about it all: the promise he brings asks something of those who would follow, and what it asks is not theoretical consent to a hypothetical agenda. A year ago we shared in worship with Bryan Serchio, and one of his songs that sticks in my soul begins with the insight that Jesus said over and over again to his disciples “follow me.” He didn't say, “Do you accept the doctrine of the Trinity” or “Have you been saved,” or “do you know the four Spiritual laws?” He said, “Follow me”.

The life to which Jesus calls us is a *working* life. And as Keizer notes, it is in the end, only a *working* life that will bring any meaningful change to the world around us. Players at the end of the day only know the game, and their only purpose is to keep playing...if they're winning to win more, if they're losing to play one more hand to turn it around. “The player” says Keizer, “knows how to advance; he does not know how to survive. The trajectory of his so-called evolution is the airborne arc of a lemming.” But the faith of Jesus urges that we *follow*—that we take up even crosses; that we *work*, and see our lives as work in progress, shaped by real practices that change the world around us.

That's what this season of Lent is meant to be about: it's shaping our lives—working it out—in such a way that when we're invited into the sacred story ourselves, we will know what to look for...we'll recognize the truth for what it is, and the *rest* of our lives for what *it* is. We will have sorted the wheat from the chaff, and stored up that which is truly our treasure, instead of cashing it in for something that might puff us up, but will never *fill* us.

There are enough players in this world, and not a few of them are dressed up in the finest religious garb. They're the ones I suspect Jesus had in his sights when he warned the disciples not to parade their piety, sounding trumpets on their way to give alms, standing tall in the synagogues to recite their prayers, making a public display of what should be an internal work of

transformation that sorts trash from treasure so that when the truth of God's love finally dawns upon us we'll know what to keep, and what to throw away—what we really don't need any more.

As we have gathered together in this quiet place, the few of us in all this world who have not only heard the blast of Isaiah's trumpet, but who have at least in this night wondered if it should not truly shape our lives, I realize there is another path. There is the *fast* that the Lord has chosen: not to play with holy things with a shared delusion that in our play will somehow save us; but to take up the work that was begun in and through us in Christ, to make our lives a reflection of God's deep and abiding love for this world.

It begins in the humblest of ways. With a crumb of bread and a sip of juice; with a sincere prayer uttered in the silence of our hearts that forces us to look at the things we have not as cards we can play in hopes of running the table for ourselves, but as wondrous gifts to be shared with all who long for the light, and love, and healing that God has brought into this world through Christ. It begins when we realize we're not *players* but *prayers* whose deepest longing is not to be taken from the game, but put right into the middle of it—to follow in the path God calls, there to find our salvation, not in flashing lights and sirens that proclaim the player's jackpot, but in the silence of a garden, in the face of an empty tomb where a voice will call out to us: "He is not here. He is risen, as he said!"

Let us pray.