

## **God's Plan**

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(Isaiah 43:16-21; Ephesians 2:6-10; Mark 7:31-37) Rev. J. Koyama

Once, when we were visiting the grandkids, we had some slow time, so we decided to play a board game. We went to the cupboard and pulled out the trusty old game of Life. I'm guessing that almost everyone has played it at one time or another.

It's a simple and straight forward game, which is probably why it has been so successful. There is a long road that curls around the board and is divided into a lot of squares. You take turns spinning the numbered dial attached to the board, which tells you how many squares along the road you can move.

The road is the road of life. And various things happen to you that you would expect to happen in the course of life. You get a job and get paid and have children and so on. It also has a few detours you can take to create more options and make it a little bit more realistic.

There is a lot of chance in the game, as there is in life, but you also get to make a lot of decisions like how much you want to pay for a house or whether you want to go down the school detour or go straight to work.

Each player starts with a little plastic car with notches in it that you can put pegs into to add a spouse and children.

The end of the game is retirement, and the players turn all the assets they have collected into cash and the winner is the person with the most cash.

All in all it is a pretty fun game to play, partly because it is fun to wheel and deal your way into accumulating capital. There are also some built in setbacks here and there to make it more risky and exciting.

The nice thing about the Game of Life is that it is so straightforward. The big decisions are, should I have children, should I go to school, should I get married, do I have enough to pay for this house and how can I maximize my retirement assets. But its simplicity also means that it presents a fairly conventional approach to life.

The game is like a map or plan for life that doesn't involve asking any deeper questions like "Is this really the life I was born to lead?" and "Is having the most cash really an ultimate goal that is worth pursuing?" And if not, where is a path that will lead me to a more worthwhile end?

I no longer have the board game in my closet, so I googled it this week to try to refresh my memory of what is on the board. And what I discovered is that the game has changed a lot over time. Milton Bradley, who invented it in 1860, was himself a religious man who designed the game as a way to teach moral character. It looked more like a checker board that you moved along and you came across various moral choices involving the need to be courageous rather than fearful, industrious rather than idle, and honest as opposed to dishonest. And at the end the goal was a “Happy Old Age.”

I’m not sure how each version changed, but apparently, in the 60’s the game was sold to Hasbro, which stripped it of the moral lessons, so that now, as one on-line family-oriented writer lamented, every decision in the game is only a matter of personal choice. So that, for example, having a child before or after marriage no longer involves any moral reflection.

The point is that the game has been evolving to reflect a changing culture. And from a business perspective this makes complete sense. If you want to sell games, you need to tailor them to where most people are at. And if a game that includes a moral dimension seems too stuffy and old fashioned for modern consumers, then you take that part out.

But for church people like you and me, struggling with moral questions is inseparable from what it means to live a good life; a life that is rooted in God's love. And the Bible is not laid out for us like a simple board game. We need to be able to consider what the impact of our decisions will be on our own well-being and the well-being of others. And we regularly face the question, "Am I willing to decide against my own self-interest when it will result in the wellbeing of others? (In other words, "Am I willing to take up my own cross and follow Jesus?)

I don't want to be too critical of the board game itself, because after all it is only a board game. But it is important to note that none of these questions are part of the board game. As far as the game goes, the only consequence of our actions in life that we need to concern ourselves with is the effect they have on our bank accounts and our own life satisfaction. So that when we are playing the game, we are training our minds to think accordingly.

And part of what gets missed, if we start to reduce life to being like a simple game board with limited options and limited interests, is the incredible diversity and the huge range of possibilities for a meaningful life that God placed before us, when he set us down in this creation.

Not least of all, the fact that God created each one of us to be a completely unique and unrepeatable sign of his grace and with a unique destiny. A game board, (which I think most of us are tempted to simply life to) is simple and straightforward, but life itself is a great mystery, full of limitless possibilities.

I had a friend in high school named Rick. He was one of the cleverest and most enjoyable people I have ever met. But he was always getting horrible grades from his teachers in school. On paper he was a total failure, projected to be a loser in the “game of life.” But among his close friends he was admired for having a clever wit and intelligence that somehow didn’t translate into school success.

I think that knowing him was one of the things that opened my eyes to the reality that God creates some really great people that just don’t fit the cookie cutter and that the people at the top are not better people. They are people who were fortunate enough to have an aptitude that fits the gameboard that was put in front of them.

And so, like Mr. Box in our children’s sermon it may be that in some ways none of us truly fit the path that has been laid out for us by society’s expectations; by the “game board” that the world sets before us. And finding out who we really are and how we really fit is a mystery

that we have to solve by seeking out the markers and following the directions that God lays out specifically for each one of us, alone and in community.

I say “in community”, because I think all of this also applies to us as a congregation. As we gather together and move into fall activities, there is so much wonderful mystery in what lies ahead. We could see ourselves as just one more congregation fitting the cookie cutter mold and we could see our path forward as nothing more than following the game board path that society expects us to follow.

Or we can see our congregation as a unique creation in a world of much greater possibilities. Who are we now? Where is God leading us? How did it happen that this or that stranger walked into the door one day and became a part of our lives and could that person be a sign for us? And how might things about us that others see as liabilities, actually end up being gifts? All these things are signs helping us along a road that God is creating just for us?

God has given us instructions; to be kind to each other, fair minded, and to love each other as he has loved us in Jesus Christ. And this fall we will continue, putting one foot forward at a time in faith, with the promise

that one day we will be able to look back and see that our lives weren't as random or meaningless as they sometimes seem, but that God had a plan and was leading us toward the meaningful and love-filled consummation that we were made to live. I'm sure that many of us can say that, even now, in a way that only you and God can quite understand.

Thanks be to God for all the various clever games we get to play in downtime with our grandchildren. But all praise and glory to God for the greater plan that God made us a part of, when God gave us life.