

# ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

The Rev. Jake W. Dell, Deacon

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## Our Readiness in Christ

*Sermon preached at the nine o'clock service, August 26, 2012*

*The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost*

*Based on Ephesians 6:10-20 and John 6:56-69*

My text today is from John chapter 6, verses 66 and 67. "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. 'You do not want to leave too, do you?' Jesus asked the Twelve." How many times have you left someone or something in your life? I have left many places and many people. Sometimes for good reasons, sometimes for not so good reasons. I've left jobs, family, friends and places that I'd come to love. Sometimes I've left in a fit of pique. Sometimes I found a thing to be "too hard" and so I said, "I cannot accept this." And I left.

In the intervening years, I've had time to reflect on my comings and goings. I've had time to examine my motives. I've come to recognize the patterns in my life. And, with a bit of effort, I've tried to change the patterns that I didn't like, and more importantly, that I didn't want to see repeated over and over again in my life. But then I hear these plaintive words of Jesus, "You do not want to leave too, do you?" And immediately I think of all those whom I've left, those to whom I didn't give a second chance, those moments in life that maybe I abandoned too soon, without letting things play out all the way.

I've learned a thing or two about games recently. This summer I signed up for a backgammon tournament. Now if you know the game, you'll follow me right away. If you don't, I promise to make this plain and simple. In backgammon, a situation can develop where your own checkers are trapped behind a wall of your opponent's checkers. It's called a prime. When this happens, you're stuck—and no matter how lucky you roll your dice, you'll never get out of the trap you're in.

What's worse is when one of your checkers is stuck on the bar—in other words, it's out of the game—and as long as your opponent has the board locked up, you can't even think about getting back in the game. So you're sidelined and stuck. And it's moments like these when you think of quitting. When you think of leaving the game.

But an interesting thing happens if you don't give up. Eventually, your opponent's board starts to break up. Cracks in his wall start to appear. And those cracks in your opponent can turn into opportunities for you. If you're lucky, you might find yourself back in the game. If you're lucky and have a bit of skill, you might even win! When that happens you look back and think, "I'm glad I didn't cut and run. I'm glad I didn't leave. I'm glad I stayed in the game."

Games are a metaphor for life, and many things that you can learn from playing a game like backgammon or football also apply to real life. Some say dating is a game. Others say relationships in general are a game. So, for instance, in the game of dating, if you find that your checkers are stuck behind your opponent's prime, if they're putting up a wall, then you should absolutely—for the sake of your self-respect—resign the game.

And here's something else I've been told: if your opponent—be it your spouse, your lover, your business partner or your colleague—takes power from you, then you better darn well take it back.

Finally, I've also been told that if you see that you can't win, then you should walk away. No one particular relationship or person is worth it—and you should never, ever sacrifice your pride or position.

In addition to playing backgammon, I've spent some time recently discovering the rules of the game of the world—at least as far as that game gets played here in the city, day in and day out. And, mind you, I really don't think New York is all that different from anywhere else. People are people. It's just that I've noticed that things cycle faster here. More matches are played in the course of a day or week here than anywhere else that I've lived.

Here's what I've discovered about how the game of the world is played: First, the world is always ready to close a deal. If something—or someone—doesn't provide immediate or discernible value, then you should walk away. Second, the world is always ready to turn something good—something of true value—into a commodity. You, as specific person, matter little to me. Why? Because by reducing you to your component parts—by reducing you to your beauty, to your talent, to your intelligence, your skill set, your experience, your social standing, etc.—I can find someone else just like you, though I may entirely neglect to see you as you truly are. Third, the world is always ready to establish power and dominion and to take it back when that power is lost. Relationships, even the most intimate, are often evaluated by who holds the upper hand. Entire strategies are devised for keeping the other party in check or for winning back lost ground. Finally, the world is always ready to move in for the kill. Only things of immediate use are deemed of value. The world is always ready to move on to something bigger and better, faster and brighter, or to someone younger and sexier.

By contrast, how does the Christian fare in this arena? How does he or she play? And by what rules? Saint Paul tells us in Ephesians chapter 6, verse 15 that our feet are to be "fitted with the readiness that comes with the gospel of peace." So, in direct contrast—even in direct contradiction—with the world's gospel of power is the

Christian's gospel of peace. From this place of peace, the Christian is not obligated to evaluate someone or something based on immediate gain.

In other words, for the Christian, it is not a question of "What can you do for me?" or even of "What have you done for me lately?" Instead, the Christian is ready for good things to be given in their due season. Ps. 104:27 says that every living creature looks to God and that he gives them "their food in due season."

The Christian does not parcel and sell a person based on her component parts, her looks, her intelligence or her experience. The Christian does not walk away from a person or a situation because it has yet to pay a dividend; instead he waits expectantly for the fullness of time to arrive—for that person to grow into the full image of God that she already bears. The Christian does not try to hurry things up or to slow things down. He does not try to get in the way of a thing as it unfolds. Rather, he waits eagerly for the bud to blossom and for its God-given potential to be revealed.

The Christian takes care to understand the signs of the times. She understands that there is a time for everything under heaven (Ecc. 3:1-8). She understands that a person, a relationship or a situation may need gentle and sustained nurturing, and that the time for reaping cannot happen before she has invested fully in the time for sowing. Finally, the Christian practices patience. This is what Saint Paul means when he writes that we must be "fitted with the readiness that comes with the gospel of peace." Implied in that readiness is the ability to be patient. Patient enough to be discerning. Patient enough to allow God time to act. Patient enough to let the beloved fall in love with the lover. Patient enough to allow enough time to pass so that even the hardest of teachings can be understood.

"You do not want to leave me too, do you?" Jesus asked the twelve. Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.'

Peter does four things in his answer to Jesus. In doing so, Peter models four ways that the Christian should play in the world's game. These are: understanding, discernment, faith and perseverance.

First, understanding. The Christian can play the world's game with understanding. "Lord, to whom shall we go?" Here Peter has understood that Jesus has the words of eternal life. In other words, Peter rejects the quick close and the immediate gain, and opts instead for a long-term strategy of eternal importance.

Second, discernment. The Christian can play using discernment. Again, "You have the words of eternal life." Here Peter chooses—specifically, he chooses Jesus. Christ cannot be made into a commodity. We cannot parcel out his teachings or his miracles; we cannot place his humanity or his divinity on a warehouse pallet; we cannot reject his crucifixion while rejoicing in his resurrection. We cannot replace him with someone else—a newer, younger, sexier, less offensive Jesus.

Third, faith. The Christian can play by faith. "We have come to believe . . ." Here Peter surrenders his power. Here Peter has made his fatal choice. He has fallen in love. He has cared too much for a single man. Jesus matters a great deal to Peter—so much so that he can withstand the grumbling of the other disciples without being tempted to walk away. But at the same time, Peter adopts a position of weakness before the one he has come to believe in. Peter cannot play power games with the Holy One of God.

Fourth, perseverance. The Christian can play with perseverance. Peter decides to stay. He does not close in for the kill—as we can assume some of those disgruntled disciples immediately left to go and do and conspire against Jesus. Instead Peter rejects the idea of any immediate gain.

Instead he chooses to stick it out. Jesus has not made it easy for Peter. Jesus has made it hard for them both. Jesus has entirely confused the situation and alienated many of those who cared about him and undoubtedly who cared about Peter too.

And yet there is the question again, "Will you leave me too?" "No, I will not, Lord," Peter replies.

Here we come face to face with what Saint Paul calls our "readiness in the gospel of peace." Or, more simply, our readiness in Christ. Peter is ready to understand the hard teachings of Jesus. Peter is ready to choose a unique relationship with someone special rather than to add another entry to his little black book. Peter is ready to surrender his power, though this makes no earthly sense.

And Peter is ready to stay. He is ready to stay and wait patiently for the good season. He is ready to stay and wait patiently for the fullness of time. He is ready to sow with the hope that he will reap. And finally, he is ready to believe that Jesus is the Holy One of God. Thus, with his feet firmly fitted with the gospel of peace, he is ready to feed on the bread that comes down from heaven. Peter is ready for eternity. May we also be ready.

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