The End of the Game

Isaiah 6:1-6, Revelation 3:14-22, Mark 10:17-22, 12:28-34

Four years ago, Norma and I moved to Springdale so that we could be close to our grandsons—Landon, who was 7 years old at the time, and Layton, who was 2. Since then, I've spent a lot of time playing games with Landon and Layton. Their favorite game is all based on World War II. We get our weapons and set out to defeat the Nazis who are trying to take over our beloved War Eagle Cove. Once we were marching off in search of the enemy when a neighbor asked what we were doing. Landon answered, "We're going after the Nazis." She was taken aback: "I haven't seen any Nazis around here," she said. And Landon replied, "See what a good job we're doing?!"

All this has set me to thinking about the importance of play-acting and pretending in the lives of little children…and the games people play with others—and even with God—long after childhood is over.

When you were a kid, did you play *hide and go seek?* Did you ever play *cowboys and Indians*—or *cops and robbers?* Did you like to *play house?* Or did you ever *play church?*

When I was a little boy, playing church was one of our favorite games. A bunch of us kids would get together and divide up the roles—one of us would be the preacher, one would be the Sunday School teacher, another would be the song leader, one of us would lead in prayer, and two would be the ushers. (You can't even play church without somebody taking up the offering…!)

As best I can recall, they never asked me to play the part of the preacher. I was usually the backslider needing to repent! That was a role that seemed to come quite naturally to little Johnny Farthing!

It was fun to play church—but, of course, it was just a game…When it was all over, nothing was different. We weren't changed in any real way. It was just a game, We were just pretending; we were only play-acting. We were just playing church. *But God sent me here this morning to tell you that the time for playing church is over.*

Now is the time for the end of the game.

If this time of worship is not a life-changing encounter with the living Lord, then we're all wasting our time…and God's. If all you're doing here today is going through the motions, just playing a religious game, you should know by now that this world offers lots of games that are much more fun than playing church. If what you want to do is play a game, you could do a lot better than this one…

Playing church: going through the motions, pretending to take God seriously, but without running the risk that you'll be touched and shaken and broken and changed forever, so that at last you just might take up your cross and begin really following Jesus. *Playing church:* John Wesley had a name for that. He called it a matter of being *"almost a Christian."*

Speaking of games: Does anybody here play chess? I've been a chess player for over half a century, but I have to admit that I'm still not very good at it. I'll never forget the time

when I was playing a young Canadian who was virtually a chess master. I had never been able to beat him, but on this particular day, for whatever reason, he played his worst game ever. He lost his queen, both of his bishops, then one of his rooks—and suddenly I had him on the ropes. I figured that I was within two moves of checkmating him. I was really close to winning the game. I *almost* had him beaten. But then, perhaps because of my over-confidence, I made a few not-so-bright moves of my own, and soon I found myself once more in a hopeless situation…and within a few moves, I had lost yet again. I almost won the game, but that's when I learned that *almost is not good enough.*

Are you still depressed about the Razorbacks losing to the University of Toledo yesterday? Right at the end of the game, Arkansas had the football and made several passes into the end zone. (They call it a game of inches for a reason.) On at least one, and maybe two, of the pass plays during the final seconds of the game, the Arkansas receiver came tantalizingly close to making a reception in the end zone for a touchdown that would have won the game. The Razorbacks almost won the game!

But do you know what we call somebody who *almost* wins? We call him *a loser*...

Almost is not good enough—not for this world, nor for the world to come. There are only two games in which *"almost"* counts for anything: *horseshoes…and hand grenades.* But hear me well: *following Jesus is not a game*—and where Christian discipleship is concerned, *"almost"* doesn't count at all.

To the young man who asked Jesus, in Mark 10, how he could inherit eternal life, Jesus replied, *"You lack just one thing…"* I wonder if that's not what Jesus is saying to you and me today: *"You don't lack much. You're just one step short of where you need to be. You're almost there! Almost…"*

Is that what Jesus is saying to you and me today?

In the 26th chapter of the book of Acts, in the King James Version that they made me memorize in Sunday School—the version that we read whenever we were playing church!—King Agrippa says to Paul, *"Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian"* (Acts 26.28, KJV). Isn't that what we've been saying to Jesus all along? We're almost persuaded, aren't we? We're almost committed. We're almost ready to follow Jesus in the path of self-denial and radical obedience. Why, we're almost Christians, aren't we?

But hear me well: The call of Jesus is *an all-or-nothing proposition.* It's a radical challenge, and there's no middle ground. It's a matter of yes or no, life or death, heaven or hell. And there's no *almost* about it.

To be almost a Christian is the same as *not to be a Christian at all*.

Have you ever wondered why we Christians haven't made a bigger difference in the life of this world? Have you ever wondered why we haven't managed to win the world for the Kingdom of Christ? Jesus came to be the Prince of Peace—yet over 2000 years later, we're still obsessed with war and violence and revenge. He came to be the Light of the world—but over 2000 years later, we're still walking in darkness. He came to give us life, but more than two thousand years later, this old world is still in love with death. He came to save us, but, most of us are still clinging to our sin and darkness. Have you ever wondered why it's turned out that way?

No doubt there are many reasons, but I for one feel quite sure that some of the most serious obstacles to the triumph of the cause of Christ in our world are wrapped up in that one little word, *almost.*

Just about everybody finds Jesus attractive, compelling, persuasive, even lovable at some level. Who would not be drawn to one so gentle, so loving, so forgiving, so totally unselfish? We know that Jesus is on to something good, and we all want to be a part of that…until we discover that being his disciple means bearing his cross, living a different kind of life that stands in sharp contrast to the values and assumptions of this fallen world. We all want to follow Jesus…until we realize that he's on his way to Calvary. We're all excited about being his disciples…until it dawns on us that he *really does mean what he says* about denying ourselves and taking up our cross. And that's when most of us draw back, stopping just one step short of embracing the life of total commitment and radical discipleship to which Jesus calls us.

We don't reject him completely, of course. We keep playing church—and we're pretty good at it, aren't we? We *almost* become real Christians…

We're not cold. We're not hot. We're just lukewarm.

We want to follow Jesus— *more or less.*

We want to be Christians—*almost.*

But there's no more perilous condition for your soul or mine than to be *almost a Christian.* And there's nothing persuasive or contagious about the witness of half-hearted, lukewarm Christians who are just playing church.

By the way: Have you had your flu vaccination yet? Are you planning to get one in the next few weeks? You know how a vaccine works, don't you? A vaccine includes just a tiny bit of the weakened or dead virus, which it introduces into your body—not enough to make you sick, of course, but just enough to activate your body's immune system, to protect you from coming down with a serious case of the illness. Playing church—being almost a Christian—is like getting vaccinated. It means that you're getting a mild, diluted form of *half-dead Christianity*—just enough to set up your defenses and make sure that you won't come down with a serious case of the real thing…

But it turns out that Jesus isn't willing to settle for playing church. Jesus isn't willing to settle for anything less than total surrender and unconditional obedience. Almost saying *yes* to his call is the same as saying *no.* But that, I'm afraid, is where many (maybe most) of us are in our Christian walk.

We don't say yes, and we don't say no. We're not hot, and we're not cold. We're just lukewarm. We're still playing church. We're almost committed, almost persuaded, almost ready to follow Jesus wherever he leads. But there's nothing powerful or compelling or persuasive about the witness of a church member—or a church—that is *almost* Christian. And we shouldn't be surprised to find that the world doesn't take that kind of half-hearted, lukewarm discipleship very seriously…or that the devil doesn't feel threatened by all our *pious words* and *pointless activities.*

The powerlessness of Christianity in the modern world—our failure to win the world for the Jesus—is rooted in the fact that so many of us—*maybe most of us*—are *almost committed, almost persuaded, almost ready to follow Jesus.* Oh, we're not atheists. We're fine upstanding members of this community, aren't we? We're not godless. Why, we're *almost* Christians.

We're right on the brink of real discipleship. We're not far from the Kingdom. We're almost there. *Almost…*

But Jesus is waiting, and the world is waiting, to see the difference it will make when we who call ourselves Christians at last begin practicing what we preach about love and peace and reconciliation and self-denial and following in the footsteps of Jesus…not part-way, but all the way—not just *almost* but *altogether*.

Are you playing church? Are you almost a Christian? That's like being *almost alive,* you know. But someone who is almost alive is, well…*dead.*

Are you playing church? Are you almost a Christian—almost surrendered to our Lord's highest purpose for your life? Then let this be the moment when you will become *altogether His,* without hesitation or reservation.

When you almost win, you lose.

When you almost succeed, you fail.

When you're almost alive, you're dead.

Almost is just not good enough.

Playing church is not good enough.

Now is the time for the end of the game.

So I appeal to you by the mercies of God:

Right here and right now, take a final, decisive step beyond a lukewarm, halfhearted religion and start following Jesus…not part of the way but all the way.

Right here and right now, let your *almost* become an *altogether*—both for this world and for the life the world to come. Amen.