

## Some Rules for “The Big Game” of Life

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Our Gospel reading (Mark 1:21-28) is one of the texts that make Mark’s Gospel so interesting. It’s just your ordinary exorcism, without the green mucus, or the 360 degree swivel neck. There’s a demon in the house, which identifies Jesus as *the Holy One of God*. What’s the harm in that? It’s not exactly the kind of name that would bring out the “sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me” line. Still, Jesus isn’t thrilled that his true identity will be revealed before a right understanding of his mission is fully known. So, he silences the little demon, and sends the evil spirit into the cornfield (for those who follow the old reruns of *Twilight Zone*).

Jesus’ silencing those who reveal his real identity happens several times in the Gospel of Mark. There are three instances here in chapter 1, verses 25, 34, and 43. Early theories proposed the idea of “the messianic secret” as a way of explaining why Jesus did this so often in Mark’s Gospel. It was a theory that also explained why the news that Jesus was the Christ was so slow to catch on and spread throughout the ancient world, proposing that this was the plan from the beginning, namely, to keep the news quiet until the right time. For instance, when the inner circle of disciples are returning with Jesus from the Mount of Transfiguration, he “charges them to tell no one what they had seen” until after the resurrection. (Mark 9:9) Later scholars came to discover that Mark was making use of a much more sophisticated literary agenda. It’s easy to say the name; but what does it mean? Knowing the secret word may win the prize for having the right answer, but do we have a right understanding of the answer we’ve given.

This dynamic culminates in that classic text in Mark 8 where Jesus asks, “Who do folks say that I am?” Peter raises his hand and jumps to his feet, “You are the Christ, the Son of the God!” (Mark 8:29) In Matthew, he gets commended for having the right answer. In Mark he gets exposed for not knowing what it means. With his very next breath, he denies that the Cross has any role in Jesus’ future, and later vows personally to protect Jesus should any danger ever arise. (Mark 14:31) In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says, “You are Peter, and on this Rock I will build my Church.” (Matthew 16:18) In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus says, “Get behind me, Satan. For you are thinking like men think, not like God.” (Mark 8:33) In a sense, that’s what’s going on in our text this morning. The evil spirit is able to say the right words. Jesus is *the Holy One of God*. But its understanding is wrong. It is thinking like Satan, because it’s a demon, a servant of Satan.

Recent scholars have come to appreciate the elaborate literary device that Mark is using. He begins his Gospel clearly, succinctly, without delay or distraction. “The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” (Mark 1:1) God confirms as much at his Baptism. “You are my Beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:11) God

reaffirms that same ringing endorsement with crystal clarity at the Transfiguration: “This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him.” (Mark 9:7) But there is not one other instance in the whole of Mark’s Gospel where Jesus’ identity as God’s Son is identified in the right way with the right understanding until that moment when the Roman centurion, looking directly at Jesus crucified on the Cross, proclaims for all to hear, “Truly, this is the Son of God.” Any understanding of who Jesus is that does not make the connection between the meaning of his ministry and his moment on the Cross is wide of the mark, just another instance of demons misleading us, as in our present text, or just another instance of wrong-headed disciples misunderstanding what it means to have faith in following Jesus. The point is that following Jesus may not be as simple or as obvious as it seems. For instance, we have lots of kids’ games that are based on following the leader, games like *Simon Says*, which is a game that relies on the magic word, the authority that comes with using the right name in the right way to get the desired response. However, the key to following Jesus is not simply found in the power of the name; rather, it is found in the truth of His Word and the life He came to offer. The key to following Jesus has everything to do with the role of the Cross in defining his mission, directing his ministry, showing us the meaning of true love and true life.

We all know that today’s the big game, the Super Bowl. That got me thinking about one of those times in my life when I learned the most about what it means to follow Jesus, or more precisely, what it doesn’t mean to follow Jesus. It was a Saturday morning pick-up football game in college, when I was at UConn, not Notre Dame. At Notre Dame, with everyone an aspiring star like Rudy, pick-up football games could be pretty dangerous. But at UConn – where every year we got run over by the Blue Hens of Delaware, where nobody noticed the football team or its games – pick-up football games were a pretty safe option for anyone who wanted to get up on Saturday before Noon. This was a game between two campus Christian groups. That should have been my first warning sign; but, hey, I was in college and, by definition, oblivious to anything important. Well, I showed up for the game and knew next to no one. I was chosen to play with the Navigators, with Campus Crusaders for Christ on the opposing side. After getting to block on offense and play the interior line on defense for most of the game, I suggested that I could go out for a pass on offense. In response, the self-appointed leader of the team let me know, in no uncertain terms, that part of the strength of growing in discipleship as a Christian was learning how to follow the leader; and, for now, that leader and his friends were giving the orders that I as a faithful disciple needed to follow! Following Jesus isn’t about learning to take orders. It’s about learning to discern the truth. Following Jesus is not about blind obedience, but growing in real understanding. It’s not about getting in line, being a good soldier, or following the person making the most noise. It’s not about doing what *Simon Says* simply because Simon says it. Learning how to follow Jesus is more subtle, more interesting, and more difficult than that.

Football is filled with lots of sayings that tell us about football and life. Howard Cosell was fond of telling us that “football is like human life in microcosm.” Vince Lombardi is

credited with a lot of football wisdom. He may not have said *winning is all there is*, but he did say, “If winning isn’t everything, why do they keep score?” He also said, “Football is like life. It requires perseverance, hard work, sacrifice, dedication, and respect for authority.” I guess I’m more of a John Madden kind of guy. “The fewer rules a coach has, the fewer rules there are for the players to break.” I think he also said this one. “Football players are temperamental: 90% temper and 10% mental!”

Jesus had a thing or two to say about rules and about life. He told us that when it comes to following the rules, the rules were made for us. We were not made to serve the rules. The rules were made to serve us. That’s what Jesus meant when he said, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:27) Following Jesus is about understanding the laws God has given and the benefit they promise. In this regard, Jesus told us that if our focus is on ourselves, on how we’re doing and what we’ve gained, then we’re not looking at life in the right way. He said that they who seek to save their lives will lose it, and those who lose their life for the sake of the Gospel, the cause of kingdom, the work of our church, they will find it, true life, and more! (Mark 8:35) It’s not just about the name, as if the name of Jesus were a magic word that won the prize and the benefits we seek. We’ve got to learn more about the man, the meaning of his life and his death. He told us that even though he is the Lord of lords, the only Son of the Father, and the Holy One of God, he did not come to command service but to commend serving. He did not come as the King of kings, but as a humble servant of all, because winning the crown is not the point.

As we watch the big game today, it will seem to many that today’s televised spectacle has in many ways become bigger than the game, turning a game and its history into what often appears to be nothing more than a two-dimensional picture reduced to winning and losing. Let’s face it, the wide world of sports nowadays is much different than the games we grew up playing in backyards and open lots. This game today has become big business, where winning has become a god-like goal for players, coaches, owners and spectators. Winning has become a god-like goal that commands complete devotion, undivided dedication, with lucrative rewards for those who win. The will to win encourages devotees to sacrifice their bodies through reckless play. For many, at every level, this will to win has brought on the problem of looking for the competitive advantage that comes through performance-enhancing drugs, all for the sake of finding our fifteen minutes of fame, along with the hope for millions of dollars of glory.

What our Gospel is trying to tell us today is that those who seek true life in this way will lose it. Asking Jesus to bless us in this devotion to winning tells us little about Jesus and less about true life. When it comes to seeking true life, we don’t need performance enhancing drugs, just the ordinary elements of bread and wine filling us with the body of Christ and blood of Christ. We don’t promise fifteen minutes of fame, just an eternity of blessing for those who lose themselves in service, living the love God gives, simply and faithfully, in Jesus’ name. Amen