

*A sermon given on Sunday, June 27, 2010,  
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,  
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates*

### ***Tag and Other Games of Discipleship***

It was a heck of a way to get a new job. Picture the scene. Here is Elijah the Prophet, the outspoken and fiery character who has spent his life speaking out against bad King Ahab and the scheming Queen Jezebel; Elijah, who organized mountaintop contests against the false prophets of Baal; Elijah, now weary and nearing the end of his days. And then here is Elisha, a farmer of some means, evidently, out innocently plowing his field. Elijah walks by and without any warning tosses his mantle over Elisha, thereby assigning him the thankless task of being God's Mouthpiece. It occurs to me that this scene resembles nothing so much as a child's game of Tag. Elijah saunters by, suddenly slings his stole over Elisha, and says, "Tag! Your IT! *You're* the prophet now!" [I Kings 19:15-21]

This, in turn, leads me to consider what other children's games appear surreptitiously in the Scriptures. Remember the story about the jealous King Saul hunting down David, who was peeking out from a cave? I think they were playing Hide 'n' Seek. Or earlier, there was the occasion upon which Samuel surveyed all the sons of Jesse and passed by each, until his eye fell upon David, the future king. "Duck, ... duck, ... duck, ... GOOSE!" Of course, not all the games in the Bible are children's games. When Matthias was chosen to replace Judas among the Twelve, the disciples cast lots – discernment by a game of craps.

Now think with me for a moment about the way that children play games. I spent a little time out at Cedar Hills this week, at our first Reading Camp Cleveland. The 4<sup>th</sup> graders, mostly from Miles Park Elementary School, were absolutely engaged in the games offered them – not only the purely recreational games, but also games that had them putting together pre-fixes and word roots; games that required them to spell out homonyms; and games that elicited reading comprehension. A child sees others playing a game and immediately wants to join in. Some years ago at a family gathering, my young nephew watched a game of Scrabble and was determined to play along. "Douglas, you can't spell any words," objected his older brother. "Douglas, you don't know the rules!" Douglas was unfazed. A young child couldn't care less about the rules or the way other people think a game ought to be played. The child simply sees a good thing and wants to be a part of it.

Such, I think, is the setting for today's Gospel. [Luke 9:51-62] Jesus is heading for Jerusalem, near the end of his earthly days. Three times he encounters someone who seems ready to follow him. Each time Jesus speaks sharply to the individual, seeming to refuse or at least discourage the volunteer. What's going on here? Why does he greet those eager to follow with seemingly impossible demands? I think Jesus is determined that those who would follow him must first understand what is expected. I think that Jesus views us a bit like those children who may leap to join in playing a game the rules of which they do not yet know. Glad to see you, says Jesus, but do you know what you are getting into?

Consider the three volunteers in the Gospel.

"*I will follow you wherever you go,*" says the first man. "Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place," replies Jesus. A committed Christian life affords less security. It simply does. Sometimes that diminished security is dramatic. When Chaplain

Dan Knaup finally arrives in Afghanistan this week to supply pastoral care there, his life will be infinitely less secure. On other occasions our diminished security is less dramatic, but no less real. Every member of this parish who truly gives sacrificially for Christ's work has that much less in his or her Retirement Account. Every commitment of time or treasure is an hour or a dollar less to make one's own life safer, more comfortable, or more predictable. There's a game called "Risk" and you've got to take chances to play. Sometimes Christianity is like that game.

*"Lord, I'll come, but first let me go and bury my father,"* says the second volunteer. But Jesus says, "Let the dead bury their dead; you go proclaim the kingdom." There is a kind of urgency when we are following the call of the Spirit. Did you ever feel moved to do a good thing – not necessarily a big project, but even a small thing, like dropping a note of thanks or of consolation. But you put it off until later, "when you have the time." How often do you get back to that good intention? Psychologists tell us that whenever we have an inclination to good, but do not act upon it, the emotion becomes substitute for the action. Jesus is looking for more than noble emotion. If commitment to action on Christ's behalf always takes back seat to our other commitments, then we will never enter the game. We must follow the occasional urgency of the Spirit. There's a game called "Simon Says," in which you've got to act immediately on what you're told to do. Sometimes, Christianity is like that game.

Finally, the third man says, *"I'll follow you, Lord, but first let me say farewell at home."* But Jesus says, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." This is harsh. And in fact, in our first reading Elisha does precisely that – goes home for a farewell barbecue before setting off with Elijah. I don't think it's proper goodbyes that Jesus is against. I think he wants us to know that we've got to keep focused on this discipleship thing. If we pay attention to God for a while, then turn our minds to work and family as if they were separate from God, then back to "religion" again later, then we've missed the point. Following God's agenda for us, like plowing a straight line, requires constant mindfulness, in all arenas of our life. In the game of Chess, you must be consistent with your focus and attention. Sometimes, Christianity is like that game.

Take some risks. Act with immediacy. Stay focused. Here are three Rules of the Game which today's Gospel seems to offer. These are hard rules! We do not learn from today's Gospel whether any of those three volunteers followed Jesus on these terms. Perhaps some days we are not sure that we ourselves can jump into the game on these terms.

But listen: God wants us to play anyway. God wants us in the game, even if we don't have all the right moves just yet. When that nephew of mine wanted into the game of Scrabble, as I recall, we just let him play. So what if words showed up that don't exist! So what if they weren't connected to the grid the way they were supposed to be, or didn't take advantage of a Triple Letter Score! He was there, in the circle, a part of the action with people who loved him.

Jesus loves you that much ... and more. The way we learn any game is by jumping in and trying our best, and by God's grace getting better with experience. The life of discipleship is no different. Take risks. Act with urgency. Stay focused. These are spiritual disciplines that come with practice. Try. Fail. Try again.

At your baptism you had a mantle thrown over your shoulders. Tag! You're IT! Jump in, and do your best.