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## **The Well Played Life: The Game of Life**

I grew up in a family that was, and still is, BIG on playing games! Every year we would get at least one new game for Christmas and add it to our overflowing game closet. In the summers and any school break, my sisters and I would gather around the table and play game after game... double solitaire, spit, war, pinochle, scrabble, monopoly, backgammon, encore, trivial pursuit, Jenga, just to name a few. While we played, we would talk and laugh, bicker and fight as siblings do so well, we'd win or lose, and then start again.

Each game has its own set of rules and instructions, its own end goal and purpose – often to finish with the most points or the most money! Today we're kicking off a new 5-week sermon series called "The Well Played Life," where we'll delve into one game a week to see what life lessons are taught through the game and then hold them up to the teachings of our faith to see how they line up. Today, we open our series with the Game of Life.

The goal in the Milton Bradley Game of Life is to make it to the end with the highest accumulated value. Your wealth might be in cash on hand, invested in your real estate, or collected through the Life Tokens which represent the random acquisitions of money along the way. Different choices and stokes of luck determine how much you are able to accumulate – did you choose to go to college or start working right away, what kind of career did you end up with, and how much did you make? How many kids do you have and how many spaces along the board did you land on that added to or subtracted from your overall wealth? There's paydays, insurance, stocks, investments, lawsuits, and even wagering on games of chance.

Did you know that the original version of this game, which was called the Checkered Game of Life was first released in 1860 by Milton Bradley himself. Instead of spaces on the board that you find in today's version, like "get in a car accident," or "car is stolen" or "adopt a cat" – the original game had spaces like "disgrace", "ruin", "crime", "prison", and even "suicide." Sounds like a cheerful game!

No matter the specifics of the spaces, being a winner in the Game of Life is all about finishing first; having the most money; retiring to Millionaire Estates, rather than Countryside Estates. The sad thing is, many people think this is what real life is all about too – that to be a **winner** in real life, a person must achieve these same goals: possessions, power, position, prestige. And our culture and its sleek advertising campaigns is only too quick to reinforce

this kind of thinking. The world tells us that the winners are those with status and clout; people with the biggest house, the fastest car, the most money. The strong ones, beautiful ones, skinny ones, young ones. Whether we like it or not, as a culture, we've bought into this board game mentality of life. After all, who doesn't want to be considered a 'winner' by those around them? But instead, we all lose as we struggle to keep up with the Joneses.

In James Carse's book "Finite and Infinite Games," he describes two kinds of games, which reveal different ways of approaching life. He said there are finite games and infinite games. Finite games have fixed rules; known boundaries in which the game is played, a board, a field, a time limit; and the number and identity of the players are known. There's a winner and there's a loser. The object of a finite game is to win. And when someone wins, the game is over.

Infinite games, however, are different. There may not be rules and if there are, they often change during the game. The playing field is boundless. There's no time limit. The players are numberless and often unknown. The object of an infinite game is not to win, but to keep playing, to keep the game going, with a goal much bigger than winning or losing.

There's nothing wrong with board games—there's nothing wrong with Milton Bradley's "The Game of Life." But we need to remember that these games are finite, and our real life is infinite. The decisions we make in life don't go away after an hour of play but can have long-term effects on us and those around us. You don't win parenting. You don't win your marriage. You don't win your friendships and relationships. You don't win your career. You don't win your life, love, faith, or God. Real life deals in the infinite; you take one day at a time, you remain present, you grow, and you step into the infinity of this life, and eternal life, whatever you conceive that to be. You show up in all sorts of circumstances, the good and the bad, the difficult and the easy, the desired and the unwanted, the joyful and the sorrowful, and you keep the game going. It's about becoming fully alive, becoming our truest and most authentic selves. Living faithfully with the life we've been gifted and sharing what we can with others.

Throughout the gospels Jesus is leading us to live this infinite game of life. Through his teaching and parables, his admonishments and invitations, he is trying to help us see the bigger picture... that the meaning and end goal of life is not found in accumulation of possessions or power or prestige – rather, it is found in faithfulness to God and living out God's love. In our gospel reading today, we hear the story that's lovingly been titled, "The Rich Fool," about a land owner whose fields have produced such a good harvest that his barns are not big enough to store his crops. But rather than giving some away or selling it (probably when the market was flooded, and the price was too low to make a good profit), he decides to tear down his barn and build a bigger one. Little did he know that he would die just after construction was completed... not giving him the chance to benefit from the wealth he was storing away in bigger and bigger barns.

Jesus reminds us through this Rich Fool, that in the infinite game of life, the goal is not about accumulation, but about what you do with what you have and the relationships you build with God and others along the way. Just a few verses later, Jesus says, "Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unending

treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

As we go about our lives this week, I invite you to reflect on all the moving pieces that make up your infinite game of life – your education and career, your family and possessions, the choices and chances you encounter along the way – and I invite you to give thanks for the gifts all around you, and to not take a single thing for granted. Rather than always focusing on bigger, newer, cooler, more... allow Jesus to guide you to place your attention and treasures where they really matter – in loving God and loving others, building relationships and serving others. May we play this infinite game of life with this higher goal in mind, for if we do, we will ALL come out as beloved and blessed – winners in God's eyes. Amen.