



247 Broad Street | Red Bank NJ 0770
(732) 747-0446 | www.umcredbank.org

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The Well Played Life: Giant Jenga

Today, we wrap up our sermon series on the Well-Played life, looking for the life lessons taught in our family or childhood games and holding them up beside our scriptures to see how they line up with our lessons of faith. Our game for this morning is Jenga. How many of you have played Jenga... either the small table size version, or the giant version you can play in your backyard? I used to love playing this game with my sisters, and I realized as I was preparing for this sermon that I didn't have a Jenga set in our house, so I had never played it with my girls. We have since remedied that, and now they love it too!

According to the official Jenga website, Jenga was created by Leslie Scott, the co-founder of Oxford Games Ltd, based on a game that evolved within her family in the early '70s using children's wood building blocks the family purchased from a sawmill in Ghana. Scott launched the game she named and trademarked as "Jenga" at the London Toy Fair in January 1983. You start with a very neat and tidy tower of 54 identically sized blocks, laid in 18 rows of three blocks, layered in opposite directions. The idea is that one by one, each player gently pushes a block out and places it in a new row on top of the tower, always building taller and taller, while at the same time destabilizing the base that holds it upright. The player who makes the tower crumble, loses the game. You can choose to play it safe and take out the middle piece of the row, leaving two blocks to stabilize that level, or you can be a bit more daring and push out one or two of the side pieces, leaving only the single center block for the tower to balance on. This game gets you thinking a lot about what makes the tower stable, and how many holes you can get away with and still leave the tower standing.

Sometimes this is how it feels to live our everyday lives... We all have losses and pieces of ourselves that we leave behind in different stages along our journey. There are times when we feel solid and strong...but often there are moments where there are gaps...middle spaces weakening us at our very core. In many ways, we do actually live our lives by subtraction and by addition. The longer we live...the more we lose - people, relationships, certainties and uncertainties, health, bearing the weight of the burdens of life - loss, unexpected twists and turns, doubts...it is what it means to be human....it is inevitable...the ups and downs of life....

Eventually over time, we like the tower - lean this way and that way...but what is it that prevents us from tumbling over? For some, it's the community of support that we build around ourselves... our family and friends... for others it's our faith that reminds us that no matter what comes our way, God is there with us and will give us the support we need to get through our troubles.

This week at ASP, one of the adult leaders from a different church group shared with me a powerful witness about his own life and faith journey. He started his testimony by saying, "You never know when you're going to need to lean on your faith. If you don't have it, it's hard to lean on... But if you have it, it's there for you when times get tough." Back in 2016, John and his wife lost their 3-month-old baby. He went to work one morning, just like any other day, but mid-afternoon, he got a call from his wife, saying that something was wrong with their daughter and she'd taken her to the emergency. After running tests in the PICU, the doctor dropped the bombshell that his baby girl had a rare and advanced form of leukemia and there was nothing they could do. Her symptoms rapidly deteriorated and within the span of 24 hours, she took her last breaths. On duty in the chaplaincy department of the hospital that day was a Catholic priest who had sat and prayed with them at the bedside of their dying child, and before he left, he shook the father's hand and said, "This is in God's hands now." To which John replied, "Yes, I know, thank you for coming and praying with us... have a good night." And the priest said again, "You know, this is in God's hands now, right?" and John replied again, "Yes, I know... thank you for coming and praying with us." And one more time, the priest said, "It's in God's hands now."

At first, John was a bit irritated by the priest's insistence on repeating himself 3 times, until he realized what he was trying to say. John would lose his child that night, and while they would be devastated by their loss, and life would never be the same, they and their baby girl would always be held in God's hands... and eventually... maybe not for a while... but eventually they would be ok again. Different, but OK. John shared with me that it was only his faith that got he and his wife through that time in their lives and he always held on to those words and repeated them often in his head... "we're in God's hands."

Life is never all sunshine and roses. We all know that there are times that challenge and overwhelm us – losses that threaten to knock down the tower we're building. But when we're building on a strong foundation – on the solid rock of faith in a loving God who we've come to know best through Jesus Christ, we can withstand the storms of life. As we hear in the scripture, the rain came down and floods came up and the house on the rock stood firm.

You know, in all the times I've heard that scripture though, and trust me, as a pastor's kid, I've heard it a lot... I even remember an old VBS song with those words... something new jumped out at me this time. In Matthew 7, Jesus says, "whoever hears these words of mine AND ACTS ON THEM will be like the wise man who built his house upon the rock." Did you catch that? "Hears my words and ACTS ON THEM." The wise man with the house on the

strong foundation is not simply the one who has faith in Jesus... not simply the one who hears Jesus' words, pouring over scriptures.... No, it's those who HEARS AND ACTS on Jesus' words! Faith alone is not enough, hearing alone is not enough to be called wise... but it is our faith and hearing put into action, living out Jesus' message of love and service in our everyday lives. This is what provides a firm foundation to carry us through the storms of life.

This week on our mission trip, I saw our youth putting their faith into action as they served families from a little town in Charmco, West Virginia. They gave up a week of their summer, the comfort of home and technology, to give of themselves, their blood, sweat, and tears, to extend Christ's love to complete strangers. They ACTED on the teachings of Jesus – building not only houses that are warmer, safer, and drier, but also strengthening their foundation of faith, as well as that of the families we served. I wonder how you are being called to HEAR and ACT on Jesus' teachings of love, mercy and justice in your life? As we go about our week, I invite you to celebrate the firm foundation of faith that gives you strength in times of trouble, but to always be looking for new ways of growing on that base. To put yourself out there, and try your hand and new ways of serving others, doing justice, and loving mercy. May we continue to build God's kingdom of peace one block at a time. Amen.