

Pentecost Sunday, Cycle C
Acts 2:1-11
Psalm 104:1, 24, 29-30, 31, 34
1 Corinthians 12:3B-7, 12-13
John 20:19-23
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Rev. Charles B. Gordon, C.S.C.
The Garaventa Center
The University of Portland

I hated playing cards with my mother, and as far as I know, all of my brothers and sisters felt the same way. And it wasn't just cards, to play any board game with her, Monopoly for instance, was a miserable experience. The problem was that she seemed to take everything so personally. If, for example, I stuck her with the queen of spades in a game of hearts, she would look at me with incredibly sad eyes, and complain in a shocked, heartbroken voice, "How can you do that to me? I'm your mother!" If I had a hotel on Boardwalk, and her token landed on the property, she assumed that as my mother she would not, of course, be expected to pay rent. If I insisted that she pay, she would count out the hundreds slowly, wondering at the unfeeling, ungrateful monster that this child she had nursed at her breast had become. I'd want to cry out, "Come on, Mom, it's only a game! It makes no difference whatever to how I feel about you!" If pressed, she would claim that she was only joking, but because she *was* my mother, I would invariably feel absolutely wretched. And if on some subsequent occasion I refused, out of a sense of emotional self-preservation, to play a game with her, she would gaze at me with those same injured puppy dog eyes. It was torture!

I think my experience of playing games with my mother has an analogue in our spiritual lives. We all spend our days playing the hands

we've been dealt. Some days come up trumps. Other times we go bust. We chalk up our victories, great and small, and try to accept our defeats with grace. Today we might be offered our dream job, or be passed over for promotion. The most attractive person at a party might flatter us with an admiring glance from across the room, or might look right through us, as if we weren't there. The spiritual danger is that we will forget that we are just playing a game. The victories and defeats that we tally up with such care, and which seem to matter so much in the moment, ultimately have no more significance than the Scrabble scores recorded on a scratch pad and left unregarded for years in the back of a desk drawer.

And all the while we can forget we are part of a deeper reality that really *does* matter. All the while, we are in Christ, and he is in us. What was your immediate reaction to what I just said? Were the first words that entered your mind, "Yah, but...?" Did some part of your brain complain, "OK, here come the pious platitudes?" That is precisely the instinct I've been talking about – the assumption that the game of life is the primary reality – that the score we are keeping in our heads is what really matters. I can only insist that it isn't, and quote the blunt words of our Savior: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Fear only God, who can destroy both soul and body in hell." (MT 10:28). Harsh, but you see the point. We all pity the pudgy middle-aged fellow who is still recounting his high school football triumphs long after the rest of the world has stopped caring. Our pre-occupation with our victories in the "real world" deserves the same reaction. You want real? Christ is real.

So, if we acknowledge that today's triumphs and defeats are not our primary reality, what is our daily life for? It is the crucible in which you and I can become the people that God created us to be. My high school coach insisted that football builds character. Whether or not he was right, Christian life certainly *does* build character. Our tenacious efforts to love God and each other, come what may, make us who we are and who we are becoming. Here's a platitude for you, and it's true: "It's not whether you win or lose; it's how you play the game."

Pentecost is precious because it peels away illusion to reveal what's really there. People from countless tribes and nations are present in Jerusalem. In every day life those differences matter. They can occasion terrible violence. But when the disciples preach, everyone hears them in their own language, and so a fundamental truth, a deeper reality comes to light. In Paul's words:

As a body is one though it has many parts,
and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body,
so also Christ.

For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body,
whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons,
and we were all given to drink of one Spirit.

Christ is real. The Spirit is real. Love is real. It is how we love, that matters.