

September 25, 2016
Amos 6:1-7

Proper 21c
The Game of Life

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Ever since I was a little kid, I've liked to play board games. I was even on the Chess Team in High School. I've played quite a few board games and am even expanding my board game tastes. One of my favorites as a kid was *The Game of Life*. The goal to the Game of Life was to have the most monetary value at the end of the game. Whoever has the most wins the game. You could also steal cards and trample down on your opponents. Take it Hasbro's Game of Life is only that...a game...but in reality, that's what society, really ourselves try to do...have the most monetary value at the end of the game...the end of our life.

What does a board game have to do with our text? Well quite a bit actually. Our text from the prophet Amos and even our Gospel reading from Luke talk about how we are to treat our neighbors. You see, helping our neighbor is part of our Christian vocation. We are called in our Baptisms to live for others; we love our neighbors as ourselves.

But from our text, Amos writes: "Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria...but are not grieved over the ruins of Joseph."

Throughout the Holy Scriptures, God continually reminds us to love our neighbor as ourselves. In the very beginning, God inspired Moses to write the story of Joseph down, and now Amos takes his readers to remember that story. Moses writes down how 10 blood brothers...they had the same father...were guilty of not loving their neighbor as themselves...not loving their brother as themselves.

These 10 brothers were jealous of their brother Joseph, because their father showed favoritism. They were upset at Joseph's dreams that he would one-day rule over them. Joseph's brothers wanted him to disappear. They wanted to win their own Game of Life. They wanted him to lose. So they made their next move...they through him in a pit, sold Joseph to traders, the Ishmaelite's, and ultimately Joseph found his way to Egypt. Looks like the brothers were winning the game.

Brother Joseph suffered much. He cried out in distress in the pit, because he had no water. While crying out the brothers ate a meal. The brothers considered themselves first...caring only for their own needs, getting ahead in the Game of Life. They were not mindful of the needs of others. Woe to those brothers!

Today's text from Amos reminds us of the suffering of Joseph and his brothers' careless reaction. God's prophet used this account from Genesis as his text to speak God's Law to the people who were trying to get ahead in the Game of Life. "Woe to those who...are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph." By appealing to this familiar story, Amos hoped to resonate with his

hearers. After all, God's indictment against His people during this era...and it seems like every era was that they lived only for themselves. "Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria." Like Joseph's brothers, Jerusalem and Samaria in Amos's day considered their needs first. They were doing whatever they could to get ahead in the Game of Life. They liked to live in luxury. Amos describes this lavish life in vs. 4-6: "Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall, who sang idle songs to the sound of the harp and like David invent for themselves instruments of music, who drink wine in bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils."

Amos captured his hearers' "me-first" attitude. Their attitude of winning the Game of Life with as much luxury as they could have. But did you notice the recurring first word in these sections of the text. Again and again the first word is "Woe!" Woe is not a pleasant word. Woe means "Warning! Pay Attention!" Woe predicts the Day of the Lord's judgement. The Day of the Lord will not be pretty for these people! Woe to these Israelites!

Yes, the situation in Amos's day is similar to the situation Jesus presents in the Gospel, the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Like Joseph's brothers, and like the Israelites in Amos's day, the rich man cared only for himself. His goal in life was to win "The Game of Life." He feasted sumptuously. He wore the most expensive clothes. Yet his neighbor Lazarus – his "Joseph" – begged for crumbs of food. Unfortunately, instead of caring for his neighbor, the rich man opted to gratify his own pleasures – to succeed in the "Game of Life." That choice was a poor choice. What God predicted through Amos for such people – the divine judgement and destruction – became reality in the rich man's life. The rich man experienced what Amos prophesied: he is spending eternity in hell, separated from God. Woe to this rich man. He is no victor in God's "Game of Life." God's game has different rules.

"Woe" isn't just spoken to these biblical bad examples of careless living, these biblical examples of people in real life making the moves that you'd make in the board game, "Life." "Woe" is also spoken to you and me, to all people. For we are all sinful by nature. The devil entices all of us to treat ourselves as first, ahead of others. The devil entices us to play real "Life" as the Board Game "Life." Woe to you, people of God, people declared to be without sin and the account of Jesus and people who by Baptism are dead to selfish sinful behavior and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Woe to you who at times live as the world lives, living in a lavish land of abundance that you use for personal gain. You do it, and so do I. You look for your own needs, and so do I. You know the areas of your life, where you are "me first" ...maybe it's with your farms, maybe you compete with your neighbor. Maybe it's with your families. Maybe it's with your kids wanting them to be the best student, the best athlete. We all do it. We all try to win the "Game of Life" or just to get ahead of the next person, but then we miss out on the person next to us, the young family that struggles to put bread on the table or school supplies in the backpacks. You might miss the elderly couple who struggles with a variety of health problems as in need of someone to talk to. You might miss the family that lives far from home who is lonely all the time and needs a friend.

Woe to you, who at times act like Joseph's brothers, like Amos's hearers, like the rich man in today's Gospel. Keep living those bad examples, fail to heed the call of repentance and faith, and you'll win the game all right...you'll finish first...first among equals in hell, who paid no attention to the Joseph's the Lazarus' in life.

God's "woe" stings. It accuses even us baptized Christians, who sin daily and need God's forgiveness. We assess our lives and realize that at times we fail to care for the people God puts in our lives. We know that we deserve hell for our sinful selfishness. We deserve hell for playing by the Board Game rules "Life" in real life.

But we know that our way out of eternal suffering isn't doing better in helping the Joseph's in our lives. It isn't by following the "rules/laws" of God's game of Life. That will never earn us salvation or the favor God. After all we confess in the meaning of the Third Article, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him." As Baptized Believers, we have a better reason to help others – and that is our certain deliverance from hell.

While you feel the sting of God's "woe," You who have been baptized also have God's Word of promise: you are "blessed." Now there's a sweet word! On account of Jesus, you are blessed! All your sins are washed away—your missed opportunities, your failures, your egocentric actions, and your times of yielding to the devil, the world, and your sinful nature's "me-first" focus...your sinful nature's way of playing the Game of Life. Your sins are washed away by the blood of Jesus. Jesus' precious and innocent blood shed for you on the cross cleanses you from the filth of your self-centered focus. He restores your focus. He puts your focus on him, on his love for you. He does this by speaking the Absolution through your pastor, by whom Jesus also delivers to you his true body and blood, which in turn creates, "fervent love towards one another." Here, Jesus places your focus on him, and by extension on your neighbors in need. Out of this focus flows love for those neighbors. You help others because helping others is a way to respond to God's forgiveness for Christ's sake.

Helping others is a way to respond to the victory that you have in Christ. You see, God's rules in His "Game of Life" are different. You don't win the game by following rules or laws...and you definitely don't win by amassing all the wealth in the world or even by not remembering the Joseph's or Lazarus'. You win the victory in Christ Alone, who won it for you! His blood cleanses you! His resurrection provides you with the fact that He has won your salvation for you!

Helping our neighbor is the ongoing task for the Christian. It's your task. It's my task. It's our task together, because that's what we Christians are to do. Not to justify ourselves or make us look good among peers. But we simply live for others, meaning we love our neighbors as ourselves. We love our neighbors as Christ has first loved us. With God's Gospel power, we endeavor in this worthy response to God's mercy for us. With God's Gospel power we put others first, and make ourselves lesser. With God's Gospel Power, the rules to the Game of

Life are different, and thank God that they are, thank God that we win, not by what we do, but what Christ does for us!

IN Jesus Name. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.