

“God and Games”

Super Bowl Sunday, February 2, 2020

Hyattstown Christine Church (Disciples of Christ)

After nearly a year of campaigns and debates, after weeks of House impeachment hearings, after days of trial in the Senate, America seeks a diversion. Today’s 53rd Super Bowl serves that purpose well. In a few hours, notwithstanding political, national, and geographic differences, most of us will watch figuratively together, the annual extravaganza that is the world’s largest single television event.

I have often used such occasions of sports mania to roundly criticize the athletic arena for its images of the worst in America-- images often antithetical to Christian values. I could easily pursue that theme today, given investigations of recruitment violations and sexual abuse littering the landscape of the sporting world, given the sign-stealing scandal in Major League Baseball, given the courtside brawl between two college basketball teams, given the overzealous father who attacked his son’s opponent on the wrestling mat. Thankfully, such unsavory escapades are countered by a pro player befriending a 16-year old fan facing cancer surgery, by a former Maryland linebacker rescuing a frantic neighbor from the fire that ultimately burned his house to the ground, by a stadium of football fans waving as one to the children at the windows of the distant hospital.

I believe that even those of you who shun the sports pages, who would not admit even to enjoying the Super Bowl commercials, must acknowledge that there are sometimes lessons of life learned from the world of athletic contests. So I presume to discuss one such lesson this morning.

The discussion I reference is about Free Will verses Predestination, implied by the title “God and Games”. Do you believe that the outcome of this evening’s game between Atlanta and New England depends solely upon the success or failure of the players, coaches, and referees? Or do you believe the outcome is known to an invested but neutral God who predetermines and manages Creation’s events

and interactions? Are the twists and turns of a game truly original and unscripted, or do they merely fulfill God's ordained plans? Whatever your answer, would you be willing to bet on it?

"God and Games" is inspired by statements made at the conclusion of one of college football's Division I national championships. An All-American defender on the winning team asserted: "It's what God wants! God put us here for a reason!" The winning Coach exclaimed: "Only God can do this! It's a blessing!"

Do you believe a game's outcome depends upon the success or failure of the players, coaches, and referees—freely exercised? Or do you believe the outcome is known to an invested but neutral God who predetermine4s and manages Creation's events and interactions? Are the twists and turns of life truly original and unscripted, or do they merely fulfill God's ordained plans?

My daughter bought a car recently, but took her time telling me, I think because she knew that I would be skeptical of her choice. The car is a used Mercedes, and it came with significant debt. She claims that God led her to that particular car. Within a week, a semi-trailer side-swiped her on a Chicago expressway. These circumstances led to a theological discussion that Stephanie had not expected, when we were later together:

God led you to a Mercedes?

Yes! I had placed a deposit down on another car, but the minister of my church implied that there was a different one waiting for me, and he was right!

So God knew all along that you were going to have this particular car?

Yes! God led me to it.

So the salesman at CarMax was just fulfilling the plan that God had for you?

Yes.

And God knew the semi would wander into your lane, and that there would be no injuries?

Yep.

And God knows what the judge will decide regarding your custody case?

(My daughter was silent)

And God knows how presidential elections will turn out?

(Silence)

Are the twists and turns of life truly original and unscripted, or do they merely fulfill God's ordained plans?

Can nothing be done by the free will of humans to alter conflicts in the Middle East?

Can nothing be done to stop the loss of human life by destructive hurricanes and tornadoes?

Can nothing be done to save a dissolving relationship?

Can nothing be done to affect the fortunes of a congregation?

St. Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan, offered wisdom that has stood for seventeen centuries:

"We are not constrained by servile necessity, but act with free will, whether we are disposed to virtue or inclined to vice."

I believe that God has endowed you and me with customized capacities to affect life's circumstances in original, unscripted ways. I also believe that God has a plan that generally supersedes mine, though they sometimes intersect.

After eight years of effort and expense, my daughter was granted custody. Now, she has lost it again.

Are the twists and turns of life truly original and unscripted by humans who enjoy Free Will, or do they merely fulfill the ordained, predetermined plans of a God who is invested, but neutral?

Either the Kansas City Chiefs or the San Francisco Forty-Niners will win the Super Bowl this evening!

You can bet on it!

Gut how?

And who knows?