**Life is Not a Zero-Sum Game** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake  
Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time The House of Hope Presbyterian Church   
Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31 Saint Paul, Minnesota  
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I’ve heard there’s an election coming up in a few weeks!

You know, most people think of *politics* as a regrettable but necessary business. *Necessary,* because we live in a world of *scarce resources*, there are many of us, and our needs, interests, and desires conflict. We need *agreements* as to the fair distribution of these limited goods, and an *established authority* to ensure the policing of those agreements. It is *regrettable,* because in the fight over these scarce resources, each of us fears being revealed as *greedy, insecure, envious, and deceitful.*

Now imagine a different kind of politics. *First,* *consider the things that really matter in this world.* St. Paul lists them in Galatians 5: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.* There is no need for an unseemly scrap over the distribution of these things, because they are *not* in short supply.

*Yet* I can have enormous sums of money, as many clothes, houses, cars, and university degrees as I like, *but if I don’t have the things St. Paul is talking about, the other things are no good to me.* And if I have love, joy, peace, and the like, it doesn’t matter how much I have of the other things.

St. Paul’s world still involves politics—*but politics of a different kind.* Instead of carving up a limited cake, *politics becomes the shared discernment of the best use of God’s gifts.* It is no longer a *zero-sum game.* My *good* no longer requires your *loss,* because the things we want are things that everyone can have.

Although we live in the richest society in the history of the world, we still assume that there is *not enough.* Not enough life, not enough food, not enough entertainment, not enough happiness.

This, of course, keeps our economy going, but the truth is actually the opposite. *There is actually too much*. We are overwhelmed, and our imaginations can’t take it all in.

But in reality, there is *limitless beauty* for us to wonder at. There is *truth* to explore—not just the dimensions of science or the ponderings of philosophy but the depths of *poetry* and the testimony of *history.* There is *goodness* in the human spirit to admire—in *great explorers* and *mighty warriors*, in the *humble potter* or the *resourceful midwife,* as Sam Wells has put it.

Yet there is also the temptation to *steal*, because we fear that there will not be *“enough.”* We are generous when we trust that we’ll have *enough;* we are covetous and anxious because we have lost this trust.

Which leads us to our text this morning from Mark 10, where *the zero-sum game* is on full display. Recall that a wealthy young man walks away from Jesus after learning how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven, (and, according to Peter Marty), the disciples worry that they’ve made a mistake in following Jesus. Peter shares the group’s *zero-sum* mindset: *“We’ve left everything to follow you. What then will we end up with?”* To Peter’s obvious fear of loss, Jesus offers an alternative word: *“[You] will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.”* Zero-sum thinking fosters a logic of scarcity*, “What will I have left?”* God’s promise of abundant life offers a better way.

The point is that *zero-sum thinking* doesn’t make for good religion. When mixed with the gospel, it becomes highly problematic. Some Christians wonder what joy their salvation will bring if God saves *everyone*—as if joy in salvation depends on the misery of some people being damned. This kind of perverse zero-sum thinking has no place in the economy of God.

In fact, we fool ourselves when we entertain the notion that there is *only so much love to go around.* Ask yourself: *When I receive more love, is somebody else therefore receiving less?* If I share my $5,000 by giving four people $1,000 each and end up having only one-fifth of what I had to start with, zero-sum thinking suggests I’m in a deficit situation. *But love and generosity don’t work this way.* The world is not an *inelastic,* *closed universe*. To give is to receive. To shower others with blessing is to be blessed oneself.

This is important to understand because people who came to Jesus didn’t find *a spiritual drill sergeant.* Being one of his disciples was less about spiritual rigor and more about *love:* *having a good relationship with one another, serving the sick and oppressed, and . . . gulp, leaving behind your home and your possessions to follow him.* The rich young man asks Jesus for *spiritual rigor,* and Jesus in turn asks him to give up the life he knows and *to live for others.* Spiritual rigor is not about the *self,* in the end, but about the *stranger.*

*“The last shall be first and the first shall be last,”* Jesus explains to his disciples. Inheriting eternal life in Christ is *not* about *checking off boxes,* not even the boxes of the commandments. It is *not* about achieving extreme-sport levels of *prayer* or atmospheric levels of *spiritual wisdom.* Whatever we think eternal life means, perhaps its first lesson is that we cannot earn or create it ourselves. Perhaps the eternal life that Jesus offers means *emptying ourselves* and our *lives* rather than accomplishing *anything.*

Zero-sum thinking doesn’t make for *good politics* either. The idea that somebody must win, and somebody must lose in every economic, legislative, or geopolitical transaction makes for a *broken* body politic and an anguished world. For instance, when congressional politics become entirely zero-sum politics, each side will viciously protect its interests. Legislative gains on one side of the aisle mean, by definition, an equivalent loss for the other side.

This is interesting because some candidates for office use *zero-sum thinking* *as a political tactic.*

When, for example, they announce that the country is now *“full,”* they can’t mean that they are personally convinced the US could not physically accommodate a single additional migrant or asylum seeker in some apartment on some street in some neighborhood of Portland, Pittsburgh, or Poughkeepsie. Rather, they are suggesting *instead* that *menacing losses* would be in store for US citizens if new immigrants were to receive food, shelter, and other legal and humanitarian accommodations.

But I’d like to gently suggest that *the zero-sum game theory,* in which one party’s gain requires another party’s loss, *is not a good theory to live by.* The scorekeeping and power displays inherent in this win-or-lose approach are *uninspiring* at best and *vengeful* at worst. There’s nothing *lovely* in thinking that *my* happiness requires *someone else* to be unhappy or that *my* appreciation for what I have in life depends on *someone else* having less. I don’t require *other* children to be seen as failures in order for *my* children to be viewed as successful. *My* wife’s beauty doesn’t necessitate the conviction *on my part* that somehow *other* women are ugly.

The church’s view of all this [indeed the view of all mainstream religion] has been to lift up and celebrate what some theologians call *the politics of love* and others call the *politics of grace and gratitude.*

Diana Butler Bass is helpful here:

*“Every day, there are gifts all around us. Whether we are facing a crisis or not, no matter our challenges or feelings, there are* ***gifts,*** *most of which go unnoticed, unappreciated, and often disregarded. Sometimes they take us by surprise-we experience the "aha" of being helped, or we suddenly see a beautiful sunset, and gratitude wells up in our being. Gifts seem to spring upon us like an epiphany, bursting our hearts with that wild admixture of humility and joy that we know as gratitude.*

*But if we cultivate our awareness to see those gifts more often, with clearer and more consistent vision, something else happens.* ***Thankfulness*** *becomes more habitual, a regular part of how we respond to the world. Yes, gratitude still holds the power to surprise and to elicit a strong emotional response. However, as a habit, it also becomes a steadying companion, incorporated into the story of our lives. Gratitude is not just a knock-your-socks-off revelation of goodness and beauty; it emerges as a daily-even hourly-disposition of appreciation toward familiar gifts, including the tailwinds of blessing.*

*This kind of paying-attention is often referred to as mindfulness. I like that more people are embracing practices of mindfulness. But mindfulness involves choosing too. We can choose to focus on our failures or our losses, on what we feel entitled to or what we deserve. We can choose anger, fear, resentment, grief, hubris, or pain. We can choose to live our lives stuck in our worst moments. We can choose to believe that everyone and everything are against us. We can choose to define ourselves on the basis of someone else's violence, prejudice, or injustice toward us. We can choose to define life as a* ***zero-sum game.*** *We can choose every negative philosophy, theology, or ideology that cuts us off from grace, and we can choose to think there is no one and nothing to thank …*

*English essayist Samuel Johnson once said, "Gratitude is a fruit of great cultivation." The Christian scriptures liken gratitude to* ***joy,*** *a "fruit of the spirit." Gratitude is not only an emotion; it is something we do. It is like tending to a garden. It takes planting, watering, and weeding. It takes time and attention. It takes learning. It takes a routine. But, eventually, the ground yields, shoots come forth, and thanksgiving blooms.”[[1]](#footnote-1)*

In other words, by practicing *gratitude,* we move from scarcity (the zero-sum game (the game of the rich young man) to *abundance,* where there is more than enough for all, and we begin to see our fellow human beings as friends and not just competitors.

Friends, the *key* to the politics of love, [the politics of grace and gratitude], the *key* to that limitless imagination that sees only *abundance,* that desires only the things that are not in short supply, that key lies in *worship.* For it is God that stretches and trains our imaginations, God’s creation that trains us to look on the world with astonishment and wonder, and God’s limitless love for us that inspires us to imagine that we and others could begin to love like that.

It’s the kind of love that brings ***joy***both to the giver and the receiver. It’s the kind of love our world is in desperate need of at the present moment. And it’s the kind of love that has the power to bring people together across great difference. In fact, it’s the only thing that ever has!

1. Excerpted from [Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks](https://dianabutlerbass.com/books/grateful-the-transformative-power-of-giving-thanks/).  Copyright © by Diana Butler Bass. Published by Harper One, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)