

Sent out from the Huddle

Genesis 28:10-15, John 20:19-22 (NRSV)

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## **Genesis 28:10-15**

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the LORD stood beside him and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

## **John 20:19-22 (Common English Bible)**

It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you." Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

The football season has been exciting so far!

The other night the Cleveland Browns won for the first time since December, 2016—which is exciting (unless you're a Jets fan)!

Earlier this season, the Packers came back against the Bears, after being down 20 points with their star quarterback Aaron Rodgers out injured—which was terrible if you're a Bears fan, but also exciting!

Last week Northwestern lost to Akron after having a 21-3 lead—which was also not great but it was exciting!

The games have been super exciting. But you know what's not exciting? The huddles. My theological position is that huddles are why God created DVRs, so we could skip right through all the huddles and get right onto the game.

Of course huddles are important, but they're not the real game. I haven't ever played football, so I asked a friend who was a coach what happens in the huddles. He says in the huddles, the players get each other pumped up, and the quarterback makes sure everyone knows where they're lining up and what the play is. Important stuff happens in huddles—but the game is the thing. If the players never left the huddle, it'd be hard to live up to the whole reason they're there: to win the game. The team can't stay in the huddle—their whole purpose begins when they say, "Game on!"

Huddles are important, but you don't win any games in the huddle. That might be why Jesus comes to the disciples in our Gospel text—they're all huddled up together. It's the first Easter evening, and they're worried the Jewish authorities might be after them, so they've formed a little huddle. A little holy huddle. A little holy huddle where Jesus suddenly appears and tells them "Game on!"

Jesus isn't content with their staying huddled together. He tells them, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." He's putting them on a mission, just as God has put him on a mission.

In this passage, John tells us what Jesus' mission is. God sent Jesus into the world to give us peace. Even more, God sent Jesus into the world to sacrifice himself for us. John tells us that when Jesus appears to the disciples, he shows them his hands and his side—how he was willing to go all the way to the cross, because he loves them... That's his mission: to love the world sacrificially.

So...if that's Jesus' mission, what's the church's mission? "Just as the Father sent me, so I send you." Jesus sends us into the world to do what he did. Jesus sends us into the world to live lives of sacrificial love for others outside of the church.

This means something really important. Something so important that you can sleep through the rest of this sermon, as long as you stay awake for this: If we're sent out to join Christ's mission, this means that the church doesn't exist to benefit us, the members of the church. The primary reason the church exists is to benefit the world, so that it will look more and more the way that God wants it to look. That means that a Christ-centered life is one which looks beyond ourselves and moves out into the world to share God's transforming love.

Jesus wasn't content for his disciples to stay in their holy huddle—and Jesus isn't content for us to stay in our holy huddle, only spending time with other Christians at church or in Bible study or in worship or anywhere else where we simply gather together and care for each other rather than reaching out to the world. It's not that the huddle isn't important—it's where we get prepared for the game. It's where we are equipped and encouraged. But remember—the huddle is not the game. No one fast-forwards through the game to watch the huddles.

You might say that at our best, the church majors in caring for those outside its bounds, and minors in caring for each other. We major in the game and minor in the huddles.

Now, to see if we major in the majors, I recently used Facebook to ask people how they would define the word “church”—and I deleted any responses from pastors. (After all, pastors get to talk about stuff like this all the time!) Then I asked the Wednesday women’s Bible study the same question. Between all of these people, I got 92 responses.

Before I tell you how they split up between the huddle and the game, I thought I’d read a couple and you could tell me whether you think that they talk about the huddle, or about the game. Here are just a few:

*A local community of believers in Jesus Christ as Son of God. They worship, learn, and serve God together. Hopefully they love Jesus, and care about each other, but also look outward to care about “others” “... serve “the least of these”.... however that group is called to do that.*

That one focuses mentions the huddle but focuses more on the game, right?

*The place and/or community where a person seeks or finds God’s comfort, grace, strength.*

That one centers more on the huddle, right?

*Church is a group gathered to worship and learn more about following God’s teachings, and then becoming a stronger example of God’s love, teachings, and practices.*

This one is a good balance between the huddle and the game, isn’t it?

Now, if answering God’s invitation to a Christ-centered life means we’re majoring in the game, and minoring in the huddle, it would seem like people would focus their answers on how we as a church are sent out into the world, just as God sent Jesus out into the world, right?

So just take a guess at how many of the 92 answers that I received mention the game—on our mission to the world, rather than our time spent with each other. Turn to someone sitting next to you and take a guess. How many of the answers mentioned this aspect of a Christ-centered life?

Only 20. (It's not that the other 72 are wrong. They're just incomplete)

This tells me that many Christians understand the Christ-centered life to be more about Jesus' love for us, and less about our sharing that love with the world. Many assume the church exists mostly for the benefits of its own members, rather than mostly for the benefit of the world. Many Christians forget that the only reason to go into a huddle is to prepare us for the game.

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When we start majoring in the huddle, and minoring in the game, we miss out. Not simply because we are not living into Jesus' words that "As the Father has sent me, so I send you..." but also because we are missing out on the joy that comes when we are doing what we were created to do.

That's right—God created us for the game. God created us to care for the world beyond us. In the very first chapters of the Bible, God gives humanity the responsibility to make sure that the world thrives. God gives us the gift of being our brothers' and sisters' keeper. God calls Abram out of all the people of the world, and blesses him to be a blessing.

By the time we get to today's Old Testament scripture, we see that God is promising Jacob that he will always experience God's presence with him, and that God will give him lots and lots of descendants, and they'll be more numerous than the sand on the sea. But right in the middle of the passage, God tells him,

*All the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring.*

Even all the way back then—near the beginning of creation—God is sending his people out from the huddle and into the game.

And when they go, they receive joy. They're living into the reason that God created us in the first place.

You know it's true, through your lives, too. So often when we hear about people's time serving on work trip or any other kind of project that gets us into the game, they say something like "I know we were there to help them, but I know I got way more out of it than they did."

I believe that's the gift of the Holy Spirit, bringing us joy as we follow Christ's words: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." After all, in our passage today Jesus breathes on the disciples and gives them the Holy Spirit, to send them out from the huddle and into the game.

I think you know the joy that comes from following the Spirit into the game. A couple of weeks ago on Festival Sunday when most of us here at worship wrote out cards to note where we perceive God's presence in the life of the church or in our own lives, many of you talked about what God was up to when you were serving people outside of the church.

Here's some of what you wrote,

*Mission: Giving back to the community is the most godly thing one can do.*

*At tutoring for Reading Power*

*To help the economically disadvantaged start and grow business and to the people to strengthen suffering communities.*

*Rummage: Seeing God provide for those in need.*

I've seen the joy that comes when we are blessing others in Christ's name at rummage. I know it doesn't always all go smoothly—thanks be to God for the people in charge who handle the difficulties with grace and dignity.

But I greeted at the door the whole day. And I saw joy abounding, as we lived out our call to put other people before ourselves. I saw joy in the faces of our poorer neighbors, who came from miles around to find inexpensive, quality children's clothing and toys that they'd never be able to afford if they were new. I saw joy in the people who couldn't believe there was so much stuff to pore over. I saw joy in college students showing up at 11:00, filled with joy that there was still stuff for sale.

But most of all, I saw joy in the "security" team, who sat at the door with me and interacted with everyone as they left. They would smile, they would chat, they would joke, they would beam. They cared for each and every customer—helping them to experience God's love, and at the same time feeling that love themselves. I saw joy in the workers leaving at the end of the day, knowing that they had participated in something far bigger than themselves—raising money for those in need all over Chicago and all around the world.

It's the same joy I see when I go down to the rummage room during the week, where committed folks are supporting and caring for each other while contributing toward an activity that reaches far beyond us and out into the world.

It's that joy that God gives us when we do what we're created to do—it's the joy that comes when we live into our blessed to be a blessing calling—it's the joy that shows we're in the game and not just in the huddle.

It's the joy that we give Jesus when he sees that we are living up to his words, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."