

“OUR SURE BET,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, April 25, 2021

Congregation, over the past dozen weeks both television and online media have been deluged with advertisements for gambling. Huge dollars are being spent to promote the gaming industry. Since many people are uncomfortable about going to the casinos in this time of COVID-19, the casinos are coming to us. Apparently, we can now place online bets even via cell phones. The ads are flashy. They make it sound so easy.

Some major athletes have been recruited to promote sports-related betting. One of the gaming ads I've seen also features a very ordinary joe touting how he has won \$60,000 plus through his bets. Sounds too good to be true. Which it probably is, for just about anyone else.

Gambling used to have a stigma. It was something you did, if at all, far away, out in Las Vegas. And as the saying goes “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.” But then in a quest to keep some bright lights on in once-blighted cities like Detroit, casinos were invited to come here. Moreover, Michigan's Indian tribes under the terms of longstanding treaty agreements that affirm their relative sovereignty also claimed their right to host and operate casinos anywhere in the state. Essentially, this welcome to gaming casinos within Michigan's own boundaries was just an extension of shifting public attitudes across our nation which already permitted states to set up government-operated lotteries. As some of you may recall, the lottery in Michigan was organized under the guise of generating fresh revenue to support public education, which sounded like a very worthwhile goal.

Since then our own state government, which used to be concerned about maintaining good public morals, has decided that it's okay to “go all in”—to borrow casino language. The more gambling the better. Taxing on the gaming industry has become an easy way of generating additional state revenues without raising individual income taxes, or even corporate taxes, with all the politics involved in that. In other words, our state, like other states, gets a huge cut of all the monies its citizens put into slot machines or lay out for roulette and crap tables. Without being too coy, I think we can honestly say that our state government has become addicted to gambling.

I'm not against anyone making money. Or state coffers receiving much-needed funds to provide for us all important and necessary services. Yet at what hidden costs? And who really pays? This should be a moral concern for us all. It certainly *used to be* for Christians like us. As your pastor, I think it should continue to concern us.

Significantly, our Bible doesn't say much about gambling. At least not explicitly. In fact, I have found just two or three episodes where there are references to games or exercises in chance. The first surfaces in the 22nd Psalm. Credited to the great King David, it

prophesizes about Jesus' own experience at Golgotha's cross. The psalmist's words are haunting:

"An evil gang is around me; like a pack of dogs they close in on me... They gamble for my clothes and divide them among themselves... Save me from the sword; save my life from these dogs." (*Psalm 22:16, 18, 20*)

Fast forward to the New Testament and the Gospel of Matthew and we see those taking a hand in crucifying Jesus "divid[ing] up his clothes among them by throwing dice" just as the psalmist anticipates. (*Matthew 27:35*) Suggested in both these scenes is a certain devil-may-care heartlessness on the part of those disposed to gamble. Imagine, throwing dice over someone's clothes. And even more particularly the clothes of God's own son left naked on a cross!

On the other hand, also in the New Testament, we see another moment where chance ostensibly seems left to rule. Indeed, in the Book of Acts, from whence our second scripture lesson for today comes, we encounter our Christian forebearers utilizing a lottery to help determine who should receive the mantle of apostleship.

Do you remember the circumstances? Already, Jesus has been resurrected. He has since ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of God our father. Meanwhile, the Apostle Judas, who betrayed Jesus so meanly, is dead—either as a victim of his own hand by hanging, as the Gospel of Matthew asserts, or the casualty of spontaneously burst guts as graphically described by the Book of Acts. (*Matthew 27:5; Acts 1:18*) Thus, it now left to the surviving eleven apostles to decide how they will fill the vacancy in apostleship and restore to their leadership group the highly meaningful number twelve—symbolically recalling the original twelve tribes of Israel.

As it turns out, the early church is most fortunate. It is blessed with talent. It is soon apparent that there are *two* very worthy and compelling candidates, Barsabbas and Matthias, with equally long track records of ministry with Jesus. Unfortunately, this means that the apostles are faced with a most difficult and potentially divisive choice. Consequently, rather than resort to a democratic vote that can hurt feelings, they opt for prayer and lottery. (*Acts 1:23-26*) In this case, the eleven apostles trust that the same God who can move mountains will also ensure the best, most optimal outcome of this lottery for the benefit of a ministry in his name and in the name of his dearly beloved son. In this fashion, Matthias is chosen as the new twelfth apostle without conflict or dissent. As we know from both the Bible and history books, it turned out well for the church and all God's people.

I think it's important to note that this lottery in the Book of Acts *is* different from the lotteries that states like Michigan run or any of the other gambling that transpires here. The outcome among the apostles is determined by appeal to God rather than Lady Luck!

And there's nothing selfish about its purpose and intention. This fact and this difference between what we see in the Book of Acts and what goes with lotteries and gambling today across the breadth of America underscores the reason why Christian churches have historically looked askance at all forms of gambling generally. At the heart of gambling beyond the pages of the Bible is the hope for quick and selfish gain. It is not a good, healthy model for the rest of our life.

I don't mean to be a killjoy. But as Christian men and women we are called to be less obsessed with thrill-seeking and immediate gratification and more soberly focused on cultivating the use of the gifts and talents that God has bestowed upon us, which is often hard work. This is what Christian stewardship is all about. Although the Bible does not condemn gambling, it offers some additional pithy sayings that should be like red flags to us.

Consider Ecclesiastes 5:10, where it says: "Whoever loves money never has enough." Or Proverbs 13:11, where it declares: "Dishonest money dwindles away, but whoever gathers money little by little makes it grow." Also meaningful to me are the words of the Apostle Paul in First Letter Timothy 6:9: "Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction." Paul adds: "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." (*1 Timothy 6:10*) Yet most of all with regard to those Biblical passages that can give us the best spiritual insight as to the dangers of gambling and the mentality that can drive it, I cherish Jesus' wisdom as we hear it in the Gospel according to Matthew. There Jesus announces: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will also be." (*Matthew 6:19-21*) For those who have ears, hear. Success at the slot machines or roulette wheel, let alone the tables devoted to craps and poker, are not going to help us get to heaven. There are more worthy pursuits to be had for us as Christians.

Now some may feel that gambling is nothing more than an innocent pastime—another form of entertainment and recreation. Yes, if it's a simple raffle or bingo game it can be a pleasant, innocuous diversion. No sin in that. No problems there. But the reality today is that gambling has for all too many become far more than a trivial pursuit. It can and does commandeer people's lives—often the lives of those who can least afford to let that happen, leaving them and their families impoverished.

One of the former treasurers for the Detroit Metro Association of the United Church of Christ, who has been with us here on a couple of occasions over the last several years,

has compared Detroit's three casinos to giant wealth-sucking machines. While they are an immediate source of income for the City of Detroit, they take it out of the pockets of some of the poorest of the poor, who enjoy the bright glitz and glamour of the casinos and live in the usually-futile hope that they will one day hit it rich.

My wife, Eileen, used to work with the wife of a Michigan State Police officer who was stationed at one of the Detroit casinos. One night when we were all on a company outing together for employee families, this officer told that no one would ever believe how closely every inch of our casinos is monitored. You can't pick your nose anywhere on the premises, he told me, without it being recorded on camera and observed by one of the police officers hidden on hand. Congregation, if anything has to be watched as closely as all that, apart from the White House, the U.S. Capitol Building, a nuclear power plant, or a military base, you have to ask what is going on and whether it's good.

I've had my own experience with casinos over the years. When I was a college student travelling through Europe, *en route* to studies in London, I ventured to the Grand Casino in Monte Carlo overlooking the Mediterranean, just below the palace where Princess Grace Kelly once reigned. I'm no Cary Grant or James Bond. But the glamour was great. Happily, in my first half-hour at the slot machines I won twenty-five dollars. Yet in the flush of excitement I also realized how seductive winning can be. I decided I didn't trust myself. Right then and there, I vowed to call it quits for life, while I was ahead. I've kept that vow.

Of course, there have been some wrinkles. About twenty-five years ago, I signed my wife and me up for a Valentine's Day special hosted and subsidized by the big casino at Nassau in the Bahamas. For just \$125 each round trip, which also included ground transportation and a free brunch, the casino flew us and a crowd of others down to the island for a single day. As we planned all along, my wife and I skipped the slot machines and devoted the day to exploring Nassau's colonial architecture and even went swimming. No gambling for us. Nevertheless, as my own conscience made me more and more appreciate afterwards, we had bought into the gaming system. Other gamblers had paid for our day of sun and fun in Nassau. Qualms from that occasion prompted me to make another, different vow not to cross the threshold of a casino again.

That stuck. Yes, it did—at least until I was invited by the Economic Club of Detroit to deliver an opening invocation as pastor for an address by one of our Michigan governors at the MGM Grand in downtown Detroit. Swallowing my reservations, I said yes. Only God has a way of often tapping us on the shoulder, particularly when we don't exactly abide by conscience's call. Minutes before I was slated to deliver the prayer, I stepped into one of the MGM Grand johns. Suddenly, there entered an older man on a mobility cart hooked up to an oxygen tank. Despite the fact that that this gent was fully tubed for

oxygen, he was smoking a cigarette, creating huge plumes of smoke that spread everywhere. Imagine that!

Remembering all our Christmas Eve concerns about oxygen tanks and the open flame of candlelight, my first thought was: *What would Jim Poet, our now-first vice president and fire extinguisher guy, say about this?* My second thought was less rational and more terror-stricken: *Oh gosh, this gent smoking with oxygen going full blast is going to blow us all up!* In that moment, standing before the washroom sinks, I could see the headline of my obituary flashing before my very eyes: *Downriver Pastor is Blown Away in MGM Grand Lavatory Explosion as Fireball Erupts!*

Friends, what a place to meet our end! What a way to be remembered! I am glad that it wasn't my end after all and that I got out of the lavatory and the casino safe and sound. After my invocation, I left the casino stronger in my resolve not to be caught dead there again.

Congregation, I think we all have to decide where we stand on gambling. For some it can be entertainment without ever becoming an addiction. Some of us are just better at putting limits on ourselves and keeping them. But how do we know for sure? And what about the example we set for others, including those who are dearest to us who might be more readily seduced into addiction? Gambling is no longer just a Vegas thing or a Monte Carlo thing. It's a Detroit thing, a backyard thing. And now, apparently, even a phone thing. If you can win sixty thousand dollars on your phone, you can lose sixty thousand dollars on your phone. Personally, I think that's a shameful thing. The fact that it can happen in our home state of Michigan is one more indication that we are an increasingly de-Christianized society.

Wherever possible, we as Christian men and women need to be the moral leaven for our community, setting a positive, healthy example for daily living. We also need to do our best to make sure that there is protection for the vulnerable—those who might be the most susceptible to being used, abused, and exploited. When the opportunity comes, I hope that we will speak up to help fellow citizens stay safe and well. God bless us in our prayers and efforts to such ends.

Congregation, let me close with one more thought. In this life, contrary to what some might think, there is just one sure bet. That's God's love and truth revealed in Jesus Christ. May we live each day accordingly, never putting any gods before our great God and our great Savior. **Amen.**