
Where Are Your Seats?

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
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"Oh, my seats must be on the front row." These are the immortal words of Bob Uecker. Now, some of you may not know Bob Uecker. He was a Major League Baseball player who was known for his humility and his humor. Uecker signed with his hometown Milwaukee Braves back in the late fifties. And he said, "I signed with the Braves for \$3,000, which really upset my father because he didn't have that much money to pay them." After playing with several other teams, he came back to the Atlanta Braves in the late sixties, and that's where he entered the Major League Baseball record books.

In 1967, despite only playing for half the season, he set a record for mishandled pitches. In his defense, he was trying to catch Phil Niekro, the famous knuckleballer whose pitches were so unpredictable nobody could catch them. When asked what he learned from the experience, Uecker said, "The best way to catch a knuckleball is to wait till it stops and pick it up."

But this line, "Oh, my seats must be in the front row," comes from a 1984 beer commercial. Uecker in the commercial is playing himself. He is wandering into a stadium already excited and full of fans. And he is very proud because he has free tickets. Called the front office. "Bingo," he says, "free tickets. These fans are going to buy me free beer as soon as they recognize who I am." And just as he pulls off his sunglasses and settles into his seat, an usher leans over and says, "Hey buddy, you're in the wrong seats. Get out." The commercial ends with Uecker at the very top of the upper deck, all by himself. But it is the line when he gets thrown out that we remember because he stands up full of pride and he says, "Ah, my seats must be on the front row."

The commercial ends, as I said with Uecker on that upper deck and you know what he's doing? There's no one around him. He's all by himself. I've been on the upper deck. You can't even see the field, much less the action. He's screaming, "He missed the tag. He missed the tag." And so, we remember those words. If you go to the baseball park today, fans of a certain age will still say when asked to leave their seats, "Oh my seats must be on the front row." Or if you already knew you were in the upper deck, you might say, "I'm sitting in the Bob Uecker seats."

Now, you might think having heard about this commercial, that this is exactly what Jesus is trying to save us from, the humiliation of having gotten ahead of ourselves. Because that's what he seems to be saying. Don't take those honored seats in case a more honored guest has already been invited and the host has to come to you and ask you to step back. Instead, take the worst seats so that the host will come to you and say, "Friend, move forward." And if you think about it, this makes a lot of sense. It avoids the humiliation that Uecker suffered, but it also recognizes the truth that status, real status, is something you have to be given. It's not something you can take, right? People have to give you that status. And this seems like a way to let you do that.

But I wonder if Jesus told parables for that purpose. Did Jesus tell parables to help us play the game better? Or did Jesus tell parables to help us understand the game we were playing? I think Jesus told us parables to help us understand the game we were already playing because we didn't know it. And I think that advice, that challenge is as meaningful and powerful today as it has ever been because so much of our ordinary life is starting to look like a game.

Think about the way we communicate with each other on Twitter or Facebook; likes, retweets, shares, following, metrics, click-throughs, view-throughs. We may have entered onto those social platforms, desiring

honest, open communication, or maybe even attempting to persuade someone else to think the way we think, but it's not long before those broad, expansive values and desires are narrowed into a much smaller frame. Likes, tweets, retweets, shares, following, these are all value laden metrics that have been created for us and without even realizing it, that's what we're trying to do, that's what we're trying to pay attention to. By the way, this sermon will appear on our Facebook page. And all you have to do is view it for three seconds and it'll count as a view. I'll be checking later today.

We think we're playing a game, but in fact, the game starts to play us. We got there for certain reasons and it turns out we adopted the values that are already there. And the sad part is, it's fun, right? The rules are clear. You know what you're supposed to do. You know how to score those points. And once you have, you know how you stand relative to everybody else. That's a lot better than real life in which none of those things are true. Real life has complication, and ambiguity, and vulnerability.

Several years ago, I walked into a restaurant with my mother for lunch. And as we were escorted to our table, mother leaned over with a smile on her face and she said, "You know George, people say that people aren't going to church anymore, but have you ever seen so many people saying grace before their meals?" "Mom", I said, "those are iPhones". And to this day we refer to them as the iPhone prayer. Look around the next time you're at a restaurant and watch how many people are just on their iPhones, not talking to each other. They started to play the game and now the game is playing them. And what do we need to do to get back to where we were, to treat the game as the instrument, as the tool that it is, because we're not going to get off Facebook and Twitter and the other social media that are part of our lives. And it's not a problem to be on them. It's just a problem not to realize that we're playing a game so that the game begins to play us.

I remember being at a seminar years ago and the seminar was kind of okay, and my presentation was fine, but I was looking forward to dinner that night with the other faculty, because the keynote speaker for this seminar was Brian McLaren, who was one of my, and remains one of my heroes. He had just written a wonderful book, *Generous Orthodoxy*, and he gave a wonderful presentation. As we went to dinner, we were ushered into our private dining room at the back of the restaurant. Brian had been delayed. There were two tables in that room. The speakers all gathered around the larger table, carefully leaving a chair open for Brian. Without having to communicate with each other, we ranked ourselves according to status around the table. I was close enough to Brian to be excited about being able to talk to him directly. The administrators for the conference, who were not speakers, sat at the other table. There were two of them. And as the crowd broke itself out, they were by themselves. And here we were with this open chair.

Well, Brian walked into the room. He took one look at what had happened. And he went straight to the other table where he sat with the administrators of the conference and he avoided all of the measuring and competitive conversation he would've had to endure with us. And I sat there that night, thinking about how I'd been convicted by his understanding of the game, how I had let the game start to play me while I listened to their laughter and joy at the next table. Because it wasn't just teaching us a lesson. Brian was bringing life to that other table. He was bringing those people we had left out back in. He was expanding the circle, so the body of Christ had grown simply by refusing to play the game we had set up for him.

This is what it takes, I think, being conscious of the game that is there, constantly being set up for you. You know you got into Fitbit because you wanted to be healthy. And now all you can do is count your steps. You know you went to school to get a broad and rich education, but how many of us just focused on our GPA? You know you started meditating because you wanted to draw closer to God, but now you have this 366 day string and you can't stop.

We started playing the game and then the game started playing us. We had wonderful values, and instead we adopted the values of the platform that we were playing or being played by. So how is it we become conscious of this? How do we turn that into the instrument it should be and not the life that it promises? I think the answer is grace. The answer is what we were singing about when we walked into church, the grace of God. We have already won the game. Jesus died for us. God created us. We already are somebody. We don't need the game to make us somebody. We've already won the game.

With this in mind, I leave you with a question, where are your seats? What will be the front row for you when given the choice? I think it's helpful to remember that we have already won the game.

Amen.