Sunday, July 1, 1984
TRIVIAL PURSUIT
Matthew 23:16-24

A very popular game right now in this country is one called “Trivial Pursuit.” My children gave me the game for my birthday a few months ago. On the outside of the box underneath the game name is a quotation from Alexander Pope, “What mighty contests rise from trivial things.”

The object of the game, according to the instructions, is for the players to correctly answer questions in each of the six categories by having landed in each of the category headquarters which are located on the game board. The six categories of questions in the edition of the game I have are: geography, entertainment, history, art and literature, science and nature, and sports and leisure.

Once a particular edition of the game has been used a number of times so that the thousands of trivia questions are easily answerable, then one can buy new card sets with new questions to add to the game. There are already four new card sets available, each with 6,000 new questions. The game can go on forever.

Here are just a few sample questions from the game: “What ocean surrounds the Madeira Islands?” (Answer: The Atlantic) “Who was the commander of the Starship Enterprise?” (Answer: Captain James To. Kirk) “What bird did Benjamin Franklin advocate as the U.S. national symbol?” (Answer: the turkey) “What 19th century humorist cabled home from Europe, ‘The report of my death was an exaggeration'?” (Answer: Mark Twain) “What’s inscribed on the tablet held by the Statue of Liberty?” (Answer: July 4, 1776) “What’s the only Southwest Conference football team not based in Texas?” (Answer: The Arkansas Razorbacks) “What Thames River bridge is nearest the Tower of London?” (Answer: The Tower Bridge) “How many hearts does an octopus have?” (Answer: three)

The game goes on and on, with thousands of questions in the various categories and it can be a lot of fun to play, particularly with a large group of people. The instructions claim that it lends itself extremely well to team play for as many as 24 players.

“Trivial Pursuit” is an ideal game. It’s fun, relaxing, and leads to laughter and good humor. And that’s what a game should do. It’s fun, too, because most of us like to deal with trivia from time to time.

But when the pursuit of trivia becomes a major occupation and not just a game, then it’s a different matter. When we begin to fight over trivial issues, then we know Alexander Pope’s comment to be true: “what mighty contests rise from trivial things.”

Unfortunately, religion has not been immune from the too-serious pursuit of trivia. There was a time in the past when theologians used to debate such questions as: “How many angels can stand on the head of a pin?” Some of us ma have learned insignificant facts about the Bible, as for example: What is the shortest verse in the Bible? Who is the oldest man in the Bible? What is the longest chapter in the Bible? What is the shortest book in the Bible?

Knowing such miscellaneous details which are unconnected to each other can be fun, but it has nothing to do with the true practice of our faith or religion — just as knowing a lot of trivia

has nothing to do with knowledge. One definition of trivia is “useless information or minor details, things that are of little importance in themselves.”

Again, the pursuit of trivia in our lives has nothing wrong with it. It can be an interesting hobby or game. Only when trivial pursuit in religion or in some other area becomes a substitute for continued searching for meaning and truth; when it becomes a substitute for God, then it can lead us astray and into a misunderstanding of religion itself.

This is what Jesus was talking about in our scripture reading for the morning from the Gospel of Matthew. He was condemning some of the religious people of his day, who in their religious faith, were concerned mostly with trivial details, the outward forms of religion, the letter of the law, rather than the spirit of the law; the inward search, the heart of religion. So, he said to them, “you worry about minor details and neglect the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith.” “You cleanse the outside of the cup, but inside you are full of corruption.” “You are like the whitewashed tombstones, which outwardly are beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So, you appear outwardly righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.” You, in other words, are pursuing trivia.

The problem of pursuing trivia in religious matters has not gone away. Today people argue about whether to use wine or grape juice in communion. Should the bread be white or whole wheat, leavened or unleavened? Is baptism valid only when done by immersion? Is it required by God that we kneel when we pray and close our eyes, or can we sit or stand up? Is it OK to come to worship without a coat and tie? Or what shall be worn?

Now I’m not saying that such matters are not open for discussion. Certainly, they can be considered, but they are not the heart of religion. They are only the outward forms. When we become overly concerned about such matters, we trivialize our faith, trivialize sin, and trivialize God.

On Good Friday, this past April, Pope John Paul II decided that he would take his turn as a priest in the confessional booth in St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome, and for several hours he had the confessions of faithful Roman Catholics who had volunteered and then been selected to make their confessions to him. A young woman from Detroit, Michigan, was one of those chosen. After having made her confession, the reporters asked her about the experience, and one asked what sins she had confessed. The young woman replied that she had confessed to wearing jeans and a T-shirt to church.

Such clothing may not be considered appropriate by some for attending Mass or other forms of worship, but it has nothing at all to do with sin as the Bible defines it. She had not confessed sin, but a trivialized idea of what sin might be.

But lest we too easily find fault with our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers, we too often have made the same mistake. We have preached against dancing and card playing and other similar practices and have defined sin much too narrowly and in so doing have trivialized it and our religious faith as well. Sometimes it seems we have defined sin as anything that is fun or brings enjoyment in life.

The opposite is the ca, according to our Christian faith. A sin of omission is the sin of limiting, of always guarding or policing, pleasure. We are sinning when we refuse to fall in love with life, to love what is lovable and what is unlovable, to savor life’s simple and non-elitist pleasures. To not celebrate and be thankful for the blessings of life — that is sin.

According to the life and teachings of Jesus — to sin is not to trust God and not to trust oneself. Because when we have this lack of trust in God and in ourselves, we refuse to continue to grow and learn and mature. We sin when we do not celebrate our dignity. That's why so many people become suckers for hero-worship, for projecting onto others their own dignity as images of God.

Jesus came to announce the Kingdom/Queendom of God. He came not to be a King himself, but to redefine kingship and to redistribute it so that everyone realizes that he or she is a king or queen, a royal person with dignity and responsibility to the world and to one another.

Let me say a little more about sin and what it is according to our Christian faith because it is one of the most trivialized and misunderstood concepts among us.

We trivialize sin when we equate it with little do's and don'ts which have mostly to do with the outward forms of religious observance, or cultural practices.

Sin is not caring — care-less-ness, apathy, coldness of heart, loss of passion — all of these are deeply sinful. In the Bible, it is coldness of heart, not hate, that is the opposite of love. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the priest and the Levite who passed by the man in the ditch by the side of the road did care about him. Coldness of heart — that is why Dante makes ice, not fire, represent the lowest pit of hell. Not caring, losing all passion, here lies the way to no compassion and therefore to sin.

So, sin is nothing trivial. Injustice which frequently comes from not caring is not trivial.

To not care is to not take seriously that we live in an interdependent creation. Each one of us needs everyone else.

Not only do have a tendency to trivialize sin, but at the same time we often trivialize God.

J. B. Phillips' famous little book, YOUR GOD IS TOO SMALL, illustrates this fact.

Some people equate God with their conscience. Yet to make conscience into God is a highly dangerous thing to do. To begin with, conscience is by no means an infallible guide; and for another, it is extremely unlikely that we shall ever be moved to worship, love, and serve a sometimes-nagging inner voice.

Others of us trivialize god by conceiving of God as a kind of grand old man. In many people's minds, God is an "old" person. Still others trivialize God by putting God in a box. We act as if we have god only on our side. God loves and protects us, but not others. Some of our political leaders like to speak of our nation as god's chosen nation, implying that other countries are not.

Churches and church denominations make the same mistake. They act as if they have god all boxed in. For example, there are church denominations which frankly assert that unless a minister is ordained in their tradition, the ordination is not valid. There are church denominations which refuse to partake of Holy communion with other Christians who are not in their denomination. These are religious trivial pursuits. The tragedy of these examples, which could be reproduced "ad nauseum" and day of the week is not difference of opinion, which will

be with us always, but the outrageous folly of trying to regard God as the Party Leader of a particular point of view.

The thoughtful individual outside the churches is not offended so much by the differences of denominations. He or she understands these are the normal variations of human taste and temperament being expressed in the religious sphere. What he or she cannot stomach is the exclusive claim made by each one to be the only “right one.”

No denomination or congregation has a monopoly on God’s grace, and none has an exclusive recipe for producing Christian character. As the Bible reminds us, the Spirit of god is like the wind. It blows where it wills and is subject to no regulation of ours.

There is nothing trivial about God. Our religion, therefore, is not to be a trivial pursuit. Matthew Fox, in his book ORIGINAL BLESSING talks about God’s cosmic hospitality. He uses the metaphor of God as a gracious, abundant, and generous host/hostess. “God has spread out for our delight a banquet that was twenty billion years in the making. A banquet of rivers and lakes, of rain and of sunshine, of rich earth and of amazing flowers, of handsome trees and dancing fishes, of contemplative animals and of whistling winds, of dry and wet seasons, of cold and hot climates.”

“It is a banquet that works, this banquet we call creation, the human planet earth. It works for our benefit, if we behave toward it as a reverent guest. God has declared that this banquet is ‘very good’ and so are we, blessings ourselves, invited to the banquet.”

To carry the metaphor further — God not only plays the host for us and becomes the banquet for us; God also has become guest too. This is one of the deep meanings of the Incarnation, that God let go of hosting long enough to become guest as well.

We learn too, from our religious tradition that God’s banquet extends to all human kind. It is not an elitist dinner. All are invited, the poor, the outcasts, and the forgotten ones. God is not trivial. God is not selective. God and God’s love are there where anyone opens his or her life to accept them. God’s grace and God’s love are not things we have to earn or work for. We can simply receive them with thankfulness, and in so doing we are changed.

There is nothing trivial about god, or about God’s love and care for all of us. It is there all the time waiting for us to accept it. Amen.