



Gambling Problems

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“And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.” - Mark 5.24 (NRSV)

I am a gambler, and so are you.

For me, the outlet is sports betting. To be more precise, I play fantasy football.

Every week between September and January, I take a chance on some players to score more points than some other players. The monetary stakes are small with the group of friends I play with; indeed, the fun of achieving bragging rights after winning feels like the much larger prize to us. We all spend an inordinate amount of time curating our strategies, looking for an edge, and praying for a winning play (and teasing one another) in what is effectively a randomized game of chance dependent on the vagaries of infinite real-life possible outcomes. I love it.

Before I first joined a fantasy football league twelve years ago, I heartily scoffed at the idea, and not just because it had been years since I closely followed the real-life sport that animates the pretend game.

Why would I devote time and energy to an artificial “team” with fake points? My job already kept me in front of a screen most of the time. My outlets and passions were more tactile: cooking, gardening, etc. And, like many others, [I have strong critiques of the NFL](#) (though given its outsize synergy



with and mirror to our wider culture, I find it worthwhile to track, akin to following and parsing the news).

I accepted the invitation to fantasy football for a much-needed jolt of camaraderie, and that's why I've loved it. Then as now I worked remotely from home, and longed for connection with colleagues and friends that a home office could not afford.

However, I'd be lying if that "jolt" of chasing points for a win didn't also animate the fun. The gambler's high is present even in our minor venture, same as it is with any other literal or figurative roll of the dice. Even if you've never set foot in a casino (I can count my own times on one hand), you very likely know what I mean. Whether it's a game of cards, a family or office March Madness bracket, or entering a new car giveaway raffle as part of a community fundraiser, the visceral thrill of "what if...?!" is a fleeting pleasure we recognize, even if we rationally know our chance at a payoff is slim to none.

Now the casinos have come to us. If you've glanced at a TV at any point in the past two years, you've seen the ads. [In the palm of our hands, almost everyone in the United States now has the ability to bet on not just sports but . . . almost everything.](#) "The powers that be in our world have decided that there's more benefit, more profit—and not to us!—by removing the guardrails around (gambling limitations)," said cultural critic Alexandra Schwartz on [a recent podcast](#). More and more people are gambling, but I don't think it's just because of its ubiquity, our curiosity, and its addictive temptation.

More people try gambling because for more people than ever, securing what we need to live "the right way" is increasingly out of reach. Moreover, more people are waking up feeling (and seeing) that help is not coming around the corner. We realize we were already gambling. We gamble on not getting sick, we gamble on hoping for a job with dental insurance, we gamble on putting diapers and milk on the credit card again in hopes that next month

will be better, and we gamble on having enough money for rent, even though [nowhere in the country pays a minimum wage that makes it possible](#). And on and on and on. And that's if we're the lucky, more comfortable ones. Indeed, we gamble on belief—the belief that we all can live a comfortable life even as the cost of doing so is on [a salary well beyond the median](#). But we believe this because deep down we know: there actually **is** more than enough, globally, for everyone to live safely, comfortably, nourished, and free but for those profiteers, corporations, and governments extracting and consuming at rates leaving scraps (and a desolated planet) for the rest of us. But we know.

Those who have always fought to make ends meet don't need to be told this. Cultural critic Vinson Cunningham, who grew up with religious prohibitions on gambling, says in [the same podcast](#) that the pervasiveness and allure of gambling now are an “invitation to re-acknowledge where actual control in our life resides.” It's more than understandable right now that an increasing plurality of people feel out of control. “Hitting big” on a moonshot bet can easily and understandably feel like our best shot to stay above water. “We acknowledge total lack of control in so many things so we grab at the closest node of control . . . if events remain [unresponsive to the usual levers of control](#) . . . [what else is there to do but] ride the rollercoaster of speculation around those events?”

We gamble now because we were gambled with first. The stock market is often (rightly) re-ferred to as a casino, and while we might not be “the house,” we're still stuck inside it as those in control of the poker tables build ever-taller spires out of ephemera (e.g. 2008 pred-atory mortgage betting collapse, current AI bubble) while the lower levels burn. [So many job listings aren't even real](#). Trying to find a job, no matter how qualified you might be, [becomes a full-time job](#). And real or not real, [the jobs people want and need aren't coming](#) with the human rights and guarantees we need to survive, let alone thrive. People are spending countless hours of their one precious life applying to jobs that aren't real to boost corporate bottom lines. “For job seekers, the impact

is lasting. These phantom listings waste time, create false hope, and erode trust in the hiring process, and companies who deploy them, altogether.” No wonder (and no judgment) that DraftKings and FanDuel look like reasonable risks by comparison beyond their own admonitions to keep bets small and just “play for fun.” Collectively, we live in the opposite of [God’s economy](#) and a mass reckoning is surely coming soon if we don’t change course.

The individualistic American “boot-strap” myth has always been a racist, capitalist lie. Now it’s more apparent than ever that there is bipartisan disinterest (and contempt) for the idea that we invest in or fight for collective well-being by those we ostensibly choose to govern on our behalf. Just as they always have, the ultra-rich and their Capitol Hill pawns are treating our very real lives like a fantasy football team. For too many this has always been the case. For too many more, now, the wheels are coming off. Will we collectively awake to our shared struggle? Fred Hampton understood this as a teenager, and our government killed him by age 21 for his success in mobilizing for a truly bipartisan solidarity economy in Chi-cago (“Nothing’s more important than stopping fascism, because fascism is going to stop us all”).

We have the numbers, but do we have the will? Meeting the basic human needs of our be-loved fellow travelers earth-side is our most urgent and holy calling. As church-members, we are uniquely positioned to manifest those needs for each other and outside our walls - materially, politically, forcefully.

How, then, shall we live?

With the odds stacked against us in a rigged game that none of us chose, we all need a new jolt. A new bet. [God’s economy is predicated on mutual aid](#)—an interconnected fabric of ju-bilee (debt relief), abundance (meeting all materials needs), and reparations (return of sto-len wealth and land)—by the people, for the people. Churches, by and large, already operate within [a mutual aid model](#)—they just might not know it yet. How might yours reimagine

itself in this way, in these times, connected to your larger community (and pre-existing mutual aid ventures)? In the United Church of Christ, [our annual Neighbors in Need offering](#) is coming up for one of our most transformative, impactful shared investments in shared humanity. And where else do we start to imagine and believe a new “what if...?!” but from the pulpit and the pews? There is always the chance to lift up the necessities of new economies in our congregations and there are liturgical resources [HERE](#) to help spark that high of possibility on a Sunday morning.

[*Imagine the Angels of Bread*](#), beloved. I’ll take *those* odds with all of you any day. In the strong name of Jesus, we say “no more” to war . . . except class war. Amen?

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