

**“Ad Fontes”**

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

31 October 2021

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Ephesians 1:15-19

Mark 12:28-34

*“and “to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength”, and “to love one’s neighbor as oneself”, — this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.”*

– Mark 12:33

**Prayer**

**Come to us now, O Holy God,  
And pour your Spirit of renewal upon your gathered church.  
Come now and speak to us in this time of meditation  
That hearing we might believe  
And believing open our hearts to your Living Word.  
Hear our prayer, O God. Amen.**

Imagine 456 adults with not much in common other than the craving for a second chance at life sequestered on a remote island where they are promised a whole new beginning – in other words, salvation – if they agree to play 6 supposedly harmless children’s games. This is the overarching storyline that ties all 9 episodes of the most-watched series on Netflix’s history together. Since it premiered last September, the South Korean drama “*Squid Game*” has become a streaming phenomenon. The show has been on Netflix’s top-10-list in more than 90 countries. In a recent official report to shareholders, the streamer disclosed the dizzying number of subscribers who have watched at least part of the first season of the new series: 142 million! To put this number in perspective, it represents two-thirds of the company’s global users. One in four Americans have streamed the episodes of this Korean-language dystopian drama.

The speed at which “*Squid Game*” took over the world piqued my cultural and pastoral curiosity. I wanted to see for myself what people around the globe have found so alluring and riveting about a streaming series that in less than a month became the hottest show on the planet. On the evening that I convinced Erik to sit down to watch the first episode with me, everything I knew about the show was tightly worded in the headline of an online article that read, “***Netflix’s No. 1 Show Will Make You Feel Gross, but You Should Watch It Anyway.***”<sup>i</sup>

Much like the 456 participants in the series, I jumped into the plot completely unaware that the childhood games would turn violent and deadly very quickly. To my utter shock, even after finding out that “elimination” in any of the games meant real death, the participants now turned into opponents keep on playing, incited by a primal

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instinct to fight ferociously with each other in a kind of survival-of-the-fittest contest where the winner-takes-it-all in the end. In the players' communal sleeping quarters, a gigantic, illuminated piggy bank filled with cash hangs from the ceiling to remind the contestants what is at stake, a grand total of roughly \$39 million dollars. Every time a player is eliminated, \$85,000 dollars are dropped into the piggy bank fanning the flames of greed and keeping alive in the competitors' hearts the hope for a chance to win a life-changing amount of money.

All the players are desperate men and women who are down on their luck and drowning in personal debt. Under the ever-watchful eyes of heavily armed, masked guards in hot pink jumpsuit uniforms, these men and women are willing to put their lives at risk and sacrifice the lives of everyone else around them to achieve financial success and personal salvation. The contestants lie, cheat, deceive each other, take advantage of the elderly, exploit women, prey on immigrants, harass asylum seekers, form alliances out of necessity but without any sense of responsibility for the neighbor and they do eventually turn on each other and kill the unprotected and the vulnerable among them. What none of the players know is that the mysterious organization that recruited them to play is financed by billionaires, all of them English-speaking white men, who invest into the notion that the game of life must have a binary outcome of either winning or losing. The VIP's, as the super-rich men wearing golden masks to hide their identities are known in the series, turn the suffering of the debt-riddled players into a spectacle for the wealthy. They indulge in the players' pain and even bet on the outcome of the violent and bloody competition.

Mike Hale, a television critic with the New York Times, questioned whether "*Squid Game*" has anything even remotely original to show or tell the millions of people who are watching the series. He summarized the whole plot of the show in a terse and scathing sentence, "*Squid Game*" is just "**empty, bloody calories**."<sup>ii</sup> Hale accused the director of the South Korean drama of using "**a pretense of contemporary social relevance**" to justify graphic killings and sickening gore as entertainment. And yet, young people everywhere are drawn to the message of the show.

Frank Bruni, another writer for the New York Times, confessed to be terrified about the possibility that so many people, especially young people, may be resonating with the vision of the world that "*Squid Game*" brings into our homes. The show is a very direct and jarring indictment of capitalism. It offers a dystopian vision of a polarized society in which, as Bruni put it, there is a gaping divide between the rich and the poor, the lucky and the unlucky and to end on the wrong side of the divide is to be damned.<sup>iii</sup> Bruni recognizes that the central story of the series transcends the incessant bloodletting and human cruelty that we watch on-screen. "*Squid Game*" is a commentary on class, greed, despair even in wealthy nations, socioeconomic disparity and the savagery of society when people see each other as competitors and rivals on the race to the top. That viewers around the world, again, especially young viewers, are somehow finding truth in the portrait of life framed by the show, Bruni concluded, is a bullet to the soul and should stop us in our tracks.

After watching the series, I couldn't help but to think of "*Squid Game*" as an age-old parable adapted to this streaming era of human civilization. The show holds up a mirror to the viewers without making any attempt to answer the moral, ethical, political and social questions it raises. Each episode, as disturbing as they can be, is a reflection of what happens when the world is the playground of mercilessly ambitious, powerful and rich men hidden in their gilded lairs while the fight for survival is fought, not between the rich and poor, but between the have-nots who still believe they have something to lose and the have-nots who know they have nothing else to lose. "*Squid Game*" tells a story of what could happen to a society when people no longer treat each other as human beings and neighbors. And the series places on the viewers the onus to decide if we can see our world in the story and how we might stop each other from seeking salvation in the very brutal and violent system that makes all of us believe that life must be defined by this rigid dichotomy between winners and losers, with fatal consequences for the losers.

For almost 2,000 years, the Church<sup>iv</sup> has had a consistent message to people who have sought their own salvation, in other words, a life of purpose and meaning, in the broken and violent systems of this world: we simply cannot win or purchase salvation. We won't find salvation in money and privilege, in violence, in the winner-takes-it-all survival philosophy of Darwinian capitalism, or in destitution and impotence either. From its humble beginnings in Palestine, Christianity has always held on to the promise that salvation comes from God's grace and becomes real, palpable and visible when we allow God's love to shape our lives and change us from the inside out. Over the centuries, the Church has tried to embody this message and to express it publicly. Sadly, we have made too many mistakes along the way, but the core proclamation of the Gospel has never been lost and forgotten because Christians keep going back to the teachings of Jesus to figure out how to love God with heart, soul, mind and strength.

I think that Jesus knew that if his followers were ever going to confront the systems of this world that make idols of the self, sex, wealth and power and punish anyone who dares to question the world's promises of success or its unreserved belief in money's salvific nature, his disciples would have to do much more than to love God with absolute singleness of purpose. Seeking to love God can easily become a religious abstraction. The religious yearning to know God and to worship God with heart, mind, soul and strength can slowly turn into a solitary practice detached from the world around it. The last thing Jesus wanted was for his followers to devote all their time on earth to spiritual practices of contemplation, meditation, sacred music, almsgiving and prayer and leave the world alone in its desperate search for hope, for love, for peace, for forgiveness and second chances, for new beginnings, for true life and for salvation. This is why Jesus told the scribe in today's Gospel lesson that Christians cannot separate the command to love God from the mandate to love the neighbor.

Jesus made one commandment out of two to dispel any doubts about the way the Church would show our love for God. We do it by loving our neighbors. To practice the faith of Jesus Christ, the Church has to embody and live out this love for God and

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for people. This is what the Church is for: to keep reminding you and me that we are here to love God and to love others, especially those people out there who are watching “*Squid Game*” and may be wondering if there is any hope for salvation in what appears to be an inescapable and dehumanizing global socioeconomic system that is often unforgiving and even deadly to everyone but the billionaires that fund its day-to-day operations.

As a pastor, I am intrigued by the popularity of “*Squid Game*’s” message and people’s indifference to the Church of Jesus Christ where we still proclaim the love of God and neighbor as the path to the healing of the human heart, the mending of our world, and to our salvation. The absurdist Korean drama only exaggerates the ethical, social, and psychological unraveling of a society that looks very much like our global reality where money and power take precedence over human life. There is no story of redemption in the series. Only the need for a more holistic salvation that is not about winning the game at all cost is illuminated by the show. In this church, on the other hand, every Sunday, we encourage each other to see humanity not as a lost cause, but as people whom God calls us to love. In one of the most evocative passages in the Christian Testament, John wrote, “***For God so loved the world that God gave his only Son.***”<sup>v</sup> What this Bible verse, which is so often misused and abused by some segments of the Church, is saying is that the essence of God is love. Love that lives for others. Love that reaches out to others and gives itself away so that humankind may have and enjoy life abundant. Every Sunday, we gather to remind each other that our church is most faithful to God when we pour the love of God back into the life of our neighbors, back into the world. Every Sunday, we proclaim hope for the future because in our hearts we know that God’s love gives us the courage and strength to believe that our world, as violent and unjust and bloody and cruel as it is, still deserves to be loved and God is still working in and through this church to tend to the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of our neighbors and to offer humankind a vision of salvation that is grounded in self-giving love.

“***White noise,***” this is how a friend described the preaching of the Church the other day. He told me that even though he still sits down to watch the worship services at his church on Facebook most Sundays, the prayers, hymns, the Bible lessons and the sermons have mostly become like white noise. My friend said that there is very little in the services that he connects with in a meaningful way. After listening to this friend who has been actively involved in the life of the Church for most of his life, I wondered if the reason why people are drawn to “*Squid Game*” but not to the Church is because, somehow, we have become white noise. I wonder if the way we speak, preach, pray and sing about God’s life-saving love no longer resonates with our neighbors’ needs, longings, and dreams.

Today is Reformation Sunday. It is a great day for us to remember where we came from and who we aspire to be and what we believe in our hearts. The Protestant Reformation was a major turning-point in the history of the Church Universal. Martin Luther, a young visionary Augustinian monk, loved the Church enough to believe that

the Church could be different, more Christ-like and more faithful to the message of the Gospel.

Luther had a revelation that changed his life. Despite being a man of faith, Luther had struggled with a sense of incompleteness all his life. He couldn't accept that God loved him unconditionally. He lived in fear of God's judgment and was constantly plagued by guilt and anxiety until one day when he was in his monk's cell working on lecture based on Paul's Letter to the Romans and he read these words, "**Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand.**"<sup>vi</sup> On that day, Luther finally understood that being a Christian is not about being good enough so that God can love you, but being grateful that, through Christ, God already loves us all. Luther made it his mission to share his personal experience of God's saving and liberating love with the world. He set into motion a theological and spiritual movement to reform the Church and to call the Christian community back to the essence of the Gospel. The rallying cry of his reforming movement was captured by a simple Latin expression: "*ad fontes*," which means back "*to the sources*."

Phyllis Tickle, a religious scholar who wrote about most of the changes in American Christianity during her lifetime, popularized the idea that every 500 years, the Church, the institution that holds on to the command to love God and neighbor, goes through a major transition. In 2017, we celebrated the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Luther's reforming movement, which means that the Church Universal is due for another major historical and theological reformation. This is a good time for our own church here in Acton to think about what kind of congregation we want to be as we face a world that has been deeply changed by the pandemic. How do we continue to show our love for one another when so many people are still missing from our pews and may never return? In 2020, people did not come to church because they couldn't. This year, many people are choosing to worship from the comfort of their homes. What kind of church do we want to be to affirm our commitment to love God and love our neighbors if we rarely see each other in person? In this time of uncertainties about the direction the pandemic will take in the winter, how do we re-imagine our congregation in way that our love is more than just white noise, but it is instead an instrument of renewal, reconciliation, and transformation for all our church members and friends? How do we want to emerge from this pandemic? The same as we were before? Different? Changed like Luther by a deeper awareness of God's unconditional and transforming love?

I know we are all busy and fatigued and it is hard to be the church in this time when, to quote Antonio Gramsci, "**the old is dying and the new cannot be born**"<sup>vii</sup> at least not yet. It is tough to begin to talk about what our church may look like in the future when we know that hybrid worship is here to stay and more of our ministries will be online even when we are able to have every person back in the pews. The pandemic has sped up the changes that technology had already introduced into the life of the Church. Chip Hardwick, a Presbyterian minister, talks about this technological change that is shaking up the Church in this way. "**In the beginning of the pandemic, we**

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**thought, “I sure wish I could go to church. But since I can’t, at least there is Facebook Live... It’s not the same, but it’s better than nothing.” By now, we find ourselves thinking: “If I go back in person, I’ll have to get dressed. I’ll need to keep my kids engaged and fairly quiet. And I’ll probably run into that person I just can’t stand. Facebook Live is better than anything!”<sup>viii</sup>** The question that we have to ask ourselves is how will we live with our hearts open to each other and to the world when technology has made staying at home and away from the pews better than anything? How are we going to invest our resources in caring for our world in need of salvation when we are not together and talking to each other? How will we be the church that gathers weekly to give thanks for God’s love and to share the saving love and grace of God with our neighbors who are mesmerized by a truthful but dark portrait of our world that offers no hope or salvation?

The answer to all these questions, I believe, is “*ad fontes*.” We go back to the sources. We take a step back and reconnect with the words of our Sacred Scriptures. We plan our future based on Christ and his vision for his followers – You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength—and your neighbor as yourself. We go back to the Letter to the Ephesians and take to heart the powerful message written to the Early Christians, “***I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you.***”

I love this passage! I love that the writer invites and challenges us to imagine the future of our church with our heart’s eyes. I love that when we look at our church with our heart’s eyes, rather than fear, anxiety and uncertainty, we experience a deep sense of confidence, joy, excitement, gratitude, and enthusiasm because we know that God’s reforming Spirit is about to do something new among us.

What vision for our church are you holding in your heart? What is the hope for our church that you see with the eyes of your heart enlightened by the love of God and neighbor?

“*Squid Game*” makes us see a world of winners and losers, of injustice and inequality, deceit and indifference, violence and untimely death where no one cares for the other and there is no escape, no salvation. You have to keep playing the same deadly game. Our Scriptures invite us to imagine a very different alternative for human life. With the eyes of our hearts, today’s Bible lessons take us back to the very sources of our faith. This morning, the foundational texts of the Church remind us that God cannot dwell in small hearts but lives in hearts that are supple and pliable that are still able to be enlarged and stretched to make space for the neighbor. We may not know for sure what the post-pandemic Church will look like, but we know that God wants us to be a church that is ready to make a loud noise in the world because we do have something worth preaching, singing, and saying to humankind. There is hope! There is salvation! And we are determined to be a church that loves God and pour God’s love back into

each other, into our mission and outreach, into our caring ministries, into our music and preaching, into the lives of our neighbors in Acton and surrounding towns and into the world.

I pray that when you turn your pledge card today and in the days to come, you will make your giving reflect what you see with the eyes of your heart. I hope that your giving today and in the days ahead will affirm the vision of hope you have for our congregation. I do pray that all of us will live into the hope of the love that opens our church's doors and our hearts to our neighbors and to the real needs and deepest longings of our world.

May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> By Rebecca Onion in Netflix's No. 1 Show Will Make You Feel Gross, but You Should Watch It Anyway, published on Slate, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2021 [<https://slate.com/culture/2021/09/squid-game-netflix-review.html>].

<sup>ii</sup> By Mike Hale in Haven't Watched 'Squid Game'? Here's What You're Not Missing, published in the New York Times digital, Critic's Notebook, 11 October 2021 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/11/arts/television/squid-game-violence.html?fbclid=IwAR1Qbf8EX9Fmu7i-TIS2Lp2QDlCfdzi96dC8V9aymS2ooTKKc580EVN50XM>].

<sup>iii</sup> By Frank Bruni in Why the Popularity of 'Squid Game' Terrifies Me, published in Opinion, the New York Times digital, 21 October 2021, [<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/21/opinion/squid-game-violence.html>].

<sup>iv</sup> I use a capital "C" for the Church Universal.

<sup>v</sup> John 3:16.

<sup>vi</sup> Romans 5:1.

<sup>vii</sup> Antonio Gramsci in Selections from the Prison Notebooks, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, New York: International Publishers, 1971.

<sup>viii</sup> By Chad Hardwick in The post-pandemic church in the Great Virtuality, published in the Presbyterian Outlook, 13 July 2021 [<https://pres-outlook.org/2021/07/the-post-pandemic-church-in-the-great-virtuality/>].