

Jesus Pressing His Luck (A Layperson's Sermon on John 17)



From DaVinci's Last Supper cropped from image on [Wikipedia](#)

Co-missioners,

In the run-up to this year's Seventh Sunday of Easter, our editor, Jerry Burce, was dreading the prospect of having to preach again on the high priestly prayer of John 17. He decided

instead to invite his congregant Christopher Neumann—layperson and frequent writer for Thursday Theology—to embark on his first-ever adventure in preaching. The result, as we see it, was a home run of a sermon, and we bring it to you as this week's food for thought and prayer.

Although Chris hasn't gone to seminary, or taken classes in homiletics or the confessions, or received any explicit tutoring on preaching, you'll see from this sermon that he has nonetheless developed a keen sense how to talk about Law and Gospel in terms at once down-to-earth and exuberant. We trust that his fresh approach to the high priestly prayer will make that text come alive for you all over again as an embodiment of the Gospel at its best.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

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Sermon on [John 17:20-26](#)

Supplementary Texts: [Acts 16:16-34](#), [Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21](#)

Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 29, 2022

By Christopher Neumann

Grace to you and Easter peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ is Risen...

My family has a knack for making top ten lists. I don't know why. Perhaps I've hijacked this from some introvert's guide to easy conversion starters. Regardless, there it is. Top ten lists.

Top ten things to have for dinner.

Top ten places you'd like to visit.

You get the picture.

Among my list of top ten movies is *Dead Poets Society*. Somewhat startling to think it is more than thirty years old at this point. If you are not familiar with it, Robin Williams plays the role of forward-thinking teacher at a rigid boarding school steeped in discipline and tradition. During one unconventional lesson, Williams has his students stand on top of the teacher's desk momentarily to observe the otherwise familiar from an entirely different perspective. My deepest thanks to Pastor Burce for inviting and encouraging me to climb into the pulpit for a top-of-the-desk experience this morning, and more importantly, to revel in amazement with all of you in the ridiculously good things we just heard.



Game Show Wheel for arcade game found on [Wikipedia](#)

You know, back in the 1980's there was a television game show called *Press Your Luck*. Suffice to say that this particular game show would crack my top ten. The premise of the show involved contestants answering trivia questions in order to amass a quantity of spins on an electronic prize wheel. The more spins acquired, the more opportunities to collect prizes in the form of cash, trips—maybe even a car, huh. The spins, however, were

not without peril. Alongside the glitzy bling of the prizes were what the show referred to endearingly as “whammies.” A spin of the prize wheel landing on a whammy-occupied space meant that whatever treasures a contestant had accumulated to that point were now considered lost. Prize account empty.

And so, true to the show’s name, a contestant had difficult decisions to make as the play unfolded. Be satisfied with what she had stored up so far and pass the anxiety-laced process on to one of her competitors, or press her luck and keep on spinning, knowing full well that whammies were lurking and might just ruin all the hard work already put in. That is what this show boiled down to: pressing your luck, taking on more risk than you should or asking for more than you ought. When is good—or really good, for that matter—actually good enough? Continue to push it...press your luck looking for more?

Of course, press-your-luck situations are not unique to game shows. They certainly aren’t foreign to us by any means. In fact, we encounter them in daily life all the time:

Little children that just got some extra time before bed to finish up a game, asking for a bedtime story on top of it.

The teenager who has been given access to the family car for the night and still decides to pop into Mom’s room to ask her to fill it up before he goes. Gasoline is expensive these days, don’t you know.

The job hunter who just got a high-paying offer but counters for more money and an additional week of time off to be included. Think of the vacation possibilities!

Right? Doing pretty well already but being willing to take a chance, risking it all to pursue even more. Pressing your luck. In some cases, this might even mean putting your good name on

the line. Sticking your neck out there, you might say, and for someone else to boot.

Think about cosigning for a loan. If that loan defaults, your credit goes bad just as quickly as the person you've helped who now subsequently has let you down. Or referring someone for a job opening at work. Am I really comfortable attaching my reputation to that guy? What if his work stinks or he acts like a jerk? How will that reflect on me? Again, pressing your luck. Assuming a certain level of risk for something more. This time someone else benefits from the risk you're taking.

Occurred to me that this is precisely what Jesus is doing in today's gospel text. He's pressing his luck. And in doing so, he's essentially asking God Almighty to get up on the desk and look at the familiar-us, to be clear—from an entirely different perspective.

For context, the gospel reading we heard just now was the tail end of what is referred to as the high priestly prayer. Jesus is on the brink of his passion. He has just washed the disciples' feet and eaten the last supper. As Jesus himself says, "The hour has come." The whole of the prayer spans the entire 17th chapter of John, and if I can be so bold as to suggest it, the lectionary does us somewhat of a disservice by trimming it to the bit we got to hear. I whole heartedly recommend taking a few minutes this week to read the lead-up to this morning's conclusion.



Wooden Christ statue from
Messiah Lutheran Church in
Fairview Park, OH

What you'll find is a three-part prayer where Jesus lifts his eyes up to heaven in petition. In part one, Jesus acknowledges that time is up and in doing so asks God to glorify his earthly work so that ultimately God gets glorified for sending Jesus in the first place. Next, Jesus prays for his disciples—the guys who have been tagging along at his heels the past several years. Prays for their well-being and sanctification: keep them from the evil one, sanctify them, set them apart in truth, he says. And then he finishes off with our text today, where Jesus inexplicably asks to lump us, the likes of you and me, in on the goodies. Maybe you caught some of the highlights. Again, this is Jesus praying to God:

Just as you Father are in me and I in you...that they may also be in us.

The glory you have given me...I have given them.

Even as we are one, I in them and you in me...that they may become perfectly one.

I desire that they also whom you have given me...may be with me where I am.

Are you kidding me? Glory? Perfect? With God and Jesus? Us???

For all intents and purposes, I would think God should be appalled at the request. Seriously, for starters let's pause for a minute and consider exactly who we're dealing with here. "I the Lord your God am a jealous God," he says. "You shall have no other gods before me." Quite frankly, this wrath of God's is certainly not something to take lightly.

How about the flood?

Or Sodom and Gomorrah.

Then there's Moses standing on the doorstep of the Canaan. Years of leadership. Poof! Shut out. Not going in.

Once in the Promised Land it doesn't take long for God to be fed up with conviction-less, god-hopping Israel and send them off packing into Assyrian captivity.

All episodes of God bringing the hammer down, and hard, on people who don't cut it. Fast forward to the night of Jesus' prayer. At this point, the crew he's working with isn't much better.

Jesus, of course, is praying while sitting with a bunch of guys who are hours from demonstrating firsthand just how ill-equipped we all are to be associated whatsoever with God's glory. One of these followers is going to betray Jesus. Kickstart his execution by selling him out for a few bucks. Another is going to vehemently deny even knowing his good friend three times. The others? Hmph. They won't even be around to blow it. They will have scattered already, protecting themselves like a flock of birds being chased by a dog.

Now this is to say nothing of us, miserable, pathetic failures that we are. Don't forget, just prior to this high priestly prayer, Jesus instituted his new commandment: love one another as I have loved you. Think about the lifetime of work Jesus had already put in. The preaching, the teaching, the healing, the befriending. Now he passes the baton. Our turn...as I loved you, right? And how might we be doing in that same work? In the job opening for which Jesus referred us? Good grief. You and me, we're the whammies if you will—making a complete hash of it.



Messiah Lutheran of Fairview Park, OH

I mean really. You can't go one week. You can scarcely make it a day or so without hearing or seeing news that turns the stomach. Wicked shootings. Wars. Divisions. Sickness. Incessant bickering. Lying and cheating. Horrible hurtful comments on social media. The list could go on and on and on. Let's be brutally honest here. Amid it all, I'm worried about me. What I think. What I want to say. What I want to do. When I want to do it. And how I want to do it. Love one another? Forget it. Not even close. Not. Even. Close. And by the way, if I don't get any of that—those wants? Thanks so much, God. Thanks for nothing.

That's precisely the type of person—selfish me—who Jesus is trying to link to himself and God Almighty in glory? Talk about

pressing your luck. Like I said, God should be appalled. And my goodness, not only should we be ashamed of ourselves, we should be flat out terrified. Terrified. Remember what we just heard in Revelation? "Behold, I am coming soon...to repay each one for what he has done." Yikes. If that doesn't make you want to run off looking for somewhere to hide, then perhaps you need to be more honest when looking in the mirror. And so here we sit, like kids with a failing report card waiting for a parent to get home from work. Doom pending. Punishment certain and deserved.

This backdrop is what makes what does arrive all the more breathtaking. Would you believe that we don't have to run and hide? That's because while atop his desk, God chose to look down at us from the perspective of mercy, from the perspective of grace. God agreed to Jesus pressing his luck for our sake. Today the Holy Spirit invites us to pick up our hanging heads and take a turn lifting our eyes (point to the cross) to remember just that.

In a love that can be neither explained nor understood, God refuses to look at us like the whammies we truly are. Anything but. To the contrary, he sees us rather as the collection of prizes. A collection of prizes he refuses to lose. In fact, the three days following show just how committed God the Father was in Jesus to see this prayer request through. "It was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain" says Isaiah. "And by his wounds we are healed." Jesus himself will underscore it a few minutes from now. Take, eat, and drink. My body, given for you. My blood, shed for you.

Healed on account of Christ, pressing his luck all the way to a horrific death on a cross to make sure his request was granted. Healed with God's approval, he who followed up Christ's death with the utterly impossible and unthinkable. The absolute greatest in any top ten list of exclamation points—opening the

tomb, raising his dead son back to life! That is how badly God wants to keep you: he pulled off the impossible to keep us united to him – just like Jesus asked. “For if we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” That’s St. Paul tying it all together. Sins forgiven. The death we must die overcome in the end. That is the core of the Easter marvel, the shocking reality right now for me, sorry wretch that I am. For you too. An Easter reality so shocking, so good, that we hardly know what to do next.



Photo by [Daniel Reche](#)
found on [Pexels](#)

That is also because this world of ours is still so full of anger and sadness. Bursting at the seams with sin. So full of whammies, if I can put it so crudely. It’s what make those financial advisement commercials we see on TV in between innings of the ball game so frustrating. Just follow that straight green line through life all the way to the finish line and...voila – happiness! Security! Please. This world is tough and getting tougher by the day. Many times, outright scary. Dark. It’s so easy to live with a pre-Easter mindset, shackled by the law and

our inability and refusal to live up to it. The corresponding pain and fear from knowing that God for his part should be disgusted and ready to drop the hammer on all of us.

It's exactly why we need so badly to come together here week after week to recharge our trust in the remarkable promises God has for us through the same Christ who prayed and pressed his luck on our behalf.

To recharge in God's confirmation of his commitment to us, anchored in Jesus' suffering and death and predicated on the forgiveness of sins. All sins. Everyone's sins.

To recharge and be reminded that Easter permanently and emphatically solidified God's new unified system. A system overflowing with freedom, joy, and life. We need regular reminders.

To come hear the words and let them sink in. To come hear the stories like we heard in Acts—Paul and Silas in prison. To hear how God moves heaven and earth, and removes shackles, literally in their case, to keep this Easter system in place and progressing. To hear next week about God unleashing the power of his Spirit and reminding us all over again of the lengths he has gone and will continue to go to unite us all in Christ. God will get it done. He will have his way. Come hear it and count on it! You are a part of it. Nothing will ever change that.

This world desperately needs Easter people. Easter people like you and me shining with a faith rooted in this new Easter reality. Easter people out in the world pressing their luck, a) by trusting in God's unfailing commitment to us in Christ Jesus, and b) by resisting complacency with good enough. Every single person you bump into this week, without exception, is someone that Jesus wants included in that unifying prayer of his. Try it this week. Press your luck for the sake of someone who needs it.

So, so many opportunities out there to do this. Shine! Let the Holy Spirit work through your words, through your actions as Easter people united forever with God through Christ to glorify him

May the peace of God that surpasses all understanding keep our hearts and minds forever in Christ Jesus. Amen.



Christopher
Neumann

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
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