

## Jesus Go

August 28, 2016

Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 20-25; Mark 1:16-20

I first heard about the game, Pokémon Go, at the July 10 church picnic, when 3 of the youth left to go catch Pokémon. I remembered the game from when my kids were little, but hadn't yet heard about this new version, which is an app you can download onto your phone and requires the players to walk to physical locations in their community. I hadn't heard about this version of the game because it was only released a few days earlier. Already, in just a few days, it had captured and engaged many players. While on our vacation this summer, our oldest son, Ben, played it, and we saw parks filled with people playing this game.

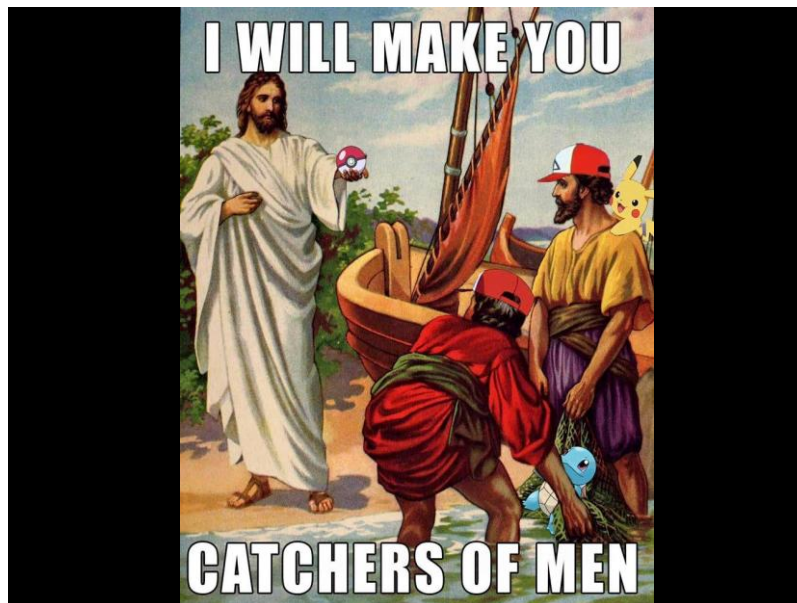
I have known for quite a while that I was going to preach on some aspect of Faith Formation this Sunday. And so, when I observed this phenomenon sweeping the country it intrigued me, and I wondered what, if any, were the connections or takeaways between this game and what we are trying to do in forming faith. My intent was not to endorse the game, but nor did I want to be quick to judge it or condemn it. I truly was curious and intrigued with what was happening.

For those who don't know about the game, the best advice I have is to find a young person who plays it to talk to! I've never played the game; I will attempt to give you my general understanding of the game, but I don't guarantee this is accurate. The goal of Pokémon Go is to capture Pokémon and move through the levels of the game; there are 40 levels. Pokémon battle other Pokémon and that earns you powers and supplies and more Pokémon. The game works through the phone's GPS, graphics system and camera to detect where and when you are in the game and make Pokémon appear around you (you see them through your phone) so you can catch them. There are Poke balls that you throw at the Pokémon to catch them. Various locations in each community are Poke Stops, places where you go to get supplies like Poke balls and potions. Interestingly, churches, schools and historical sites are frequently Poke stops. And there are Poke gyms to battle other Pokémon and win that space for your team.

My initial question, in thinking about this sermon, was "what do we mean when we say 'faith formation'?" But when Pokémon Go was released and I saw how it captured and engaged so many people, I quickly had other questions: what was

happening? How is it that this game has taken off like this? Is there anything the church could learn? Isn't this how we hope faith captures and engages people? And so I started talking to people about this game and my questions. While I may have initially been thinking of this game as a metaphor for faith formation—faith formation is like the game of Pokémon Go—my conversations led me more in the direction of illustration. In many ways, Pokémon Go has functioned as a mirror for what we do; giving me clarity and words to talk about it. And my son cautioned me not to equate church and Pokémon Go, as he had already lost interest in the game, and so thought it wasn't a good comparison.

A friend sent me this meme, and it has become for me, the defining image for talking about faith formation:



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I thought this was just great and it got my imagination going! But what you need to know is that I saw it first on my phone, and the picture got cut off, so that what I read was, “I will make you catchers of me”. And I thought that was pretty clever, for after all, isn't that what faith formation is all about? We want our children and young people to catch Jesus, to get what it means to believe in Jesus, to follow Jesus, to know Jesus. That is great! “I will make you catchers of me!”

But as I looked at this picture some more, still on my phone, mind you, I saw that it was Jesus who was holding the Poke ball, which made it look like it was Jesus who was throwing the Poke ball to catch the disciples, and I thought, of course,

it's so like Jesus to turn the game on its head! We think faith formation is all about catching Jesus; but he knows it is all about him catching us! Again, very clever indeed!

You can imagine my surprise when I went to the website last week to download the image onto my computer to use in this sermon, and realized that it actually said "I will make you catchers of men!" Apart from not liking the male language, I realized it was making a statement about what we in the church are to be about—catching people and making disciples, not spending our time catching and fighting mythical creatures. But, on further reflection, I realized that if Jesus has the Poke balls, then he's the Poke stop where we get more supplies, and this is also true. Again, very clever. This picture contains within it, or at least, I've read within it, the many layers and intentions of what, I think, lies at the heart of what we mean when we talk about faith and faith formation—being catchers of Jesus, Jesus catching us, and Jesus giving us what we need for our journey.

In the same way, I think that is what Jesus is doing in the Mark passage when he calls the disciples. He tells them that instead of catching fish, they will be turning their attention to people and offering them opportunities to catch Jesus; and in calling them, Jesus has in fact, caught them and invited them to be his followers. And, as we see over and over again in the Gospels, Jesus has what people need, if they will only see it and trust him.

I think these key meanings are also found in Deuteronomy 6. We believe that what we do on a Sunday morning is keeping the words that Moses recited—love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Every week, we recite these words, in all their varied forms, to our children and in doing so, we also recite them to ourselves—and we hope that families talk about them when they are at home and when they are away, that these words and stories are close at hand when we lie down and when we rise. We want these words and stories to catch us, and we want our children to catch them.

We invite our children's questions about the meaning of these stories, and we engage them in exploration of the meaning of the stories. We try to make connections between the stories we read in the Bible and our everyday lives. I suspect that most of us haven't bound them as a sign on our hands, or fixed them as an emblem on our foreheads, or written them on the doorposts of our houses

and gates, but we hope, in the words of Jeremiah, that they are written on our hearts. (Jeremiah 31:33) We hope that through the regular, repetitive hearing and reciting of these stories, that they will be caught, and that we will also be caught up into them.

The intent of faith formation is to shape us into followers of Jesus so that our very habits and patterns of living are shaped after the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We participate in the life of this congregation so that we can learn, and then practice, and practice and practice some more, what it means to live the Jesus way. This does not come naturally or easily. The way of Jesus is counter-cultural and counter-intuitive. The way of Jesus is not the way of the world.

Unfortunately, the world has the opportunity to shape and form us for most of the week, so what we do here on Sunday morning becomes crucial to our survival as Jesus followers. Faith formation is what we mostly associate with what we do during the second hour of our time together—Sunday School; but it is also what we do in the first hour during worship, through singing hymns and praying and engaging with scripture. And faith formation is what we do when we serve together at The Window, or The Depot, or when we clean up the church yard and Berkey Avenue. In service, our very bodies take on the form of Jesus' life, and the posture we take in those acts of service forms us into being like Jesus. We are formed in our faith every time we enact these stories as we sit with someone and listen to them, or pray for them, or prepare a meal for someone, or give someone a ride, or dig potatoes to raise money for Model School; every time our bodies are reflect or imitate Jesus' body as it bent to heal and cure, as it hung on the cross, as it appeared in its resurrected form, we are living as a follower of Jesus.

These passages invite all of us to keep growing in our faith. We tend to think that faith formation is what we do with the children and youth in our midst, but the Deuteronomy passage shows it is an intergenerational practice—in order to tell the stories of faith, we have to know them, and we have to know how they keep being relevant to us in our 30s and 50s and 60s and 90s. In order to tell the stories, they have to be connected with our daily lives as we currently experience them, and that takes intention and attention on our part. Jesus' invitation to follow him is a personal and individual invitation. Each of us needs to respond to this invitation on our own, and take the steps we need to take in order to say yes to the invitation. Jesus' invitation is personal and is extended to each one of us,

regardless of our age and stage in life. And it is an invitation we have to keep saying yes to over and over and over again.

The unique thing about the Pokémon Go game is that while other electronic games are played on computers and devices at home—even if you play with people in other geographic areas, you still play from inside your home—this game requires players to leave their houses. This is not a game you can play at home by yourself. This is a game that takes you outside the walls of your house and into your community. In the same way, those disciples of Jesus who were curious about him and what he was doing, had to leave their nets and their boats, and follow Jesus. They could not stay in the comfort of what they knew if they wanted to follow Jesus.

If we are truly in the business of forming faith as a congregation, then what we do will not stay within the walls of this building. We teach and equip here, but the purpose is not to benefit only those who are within these walls; the purpose of teaching and equipping is so that we can be sent into the world to be Christ's presence. Following Christ is not sedentary or solitary, but active and engaged with the community and world in which we are sent.

Which brings us to the point that in the game of Pokémon Go, churches are Poke stops. I texted one of the youth to see if Berkey was a Poke stop, and it turns out we are! We are also a gym. I love the idea that we are a place—a stop—where you can come and get what you need in order to go back out into the community. It is here in this place, where you can find food and nourishment for the journey. Might the fact that this game uses churches as supply stations be a call to us to live into our calling?

While I struggle a bit with the image of the gym as a place of battles, I like the aspect of gymnasium as a training ground; a place where we come to train for our calling; where we come to condition and get in shape. How does the concept of faith formation change when we think of it as training and conditioning, and we think of this place as a gymnasium?

Ultimately, walking with Jesus is not a solitary practice but one best done in the company of others. While there are some solitary players of Pokémon Go, most people I spoke with said it is playing with friends, and meeting new people that

keeps them playing. For those who have lost interest in the game already, it is because their friends were not involved in it. Games, like faith and life, are best played and lived in community. Our faith is more fully formed when we live and walk and grow and engage with others, who challenge and encourage us.

This game and our faith change how we see the world. Pokémon Go uses what is called “augmented reality”, meaning that when you look through your phone, you see what is before you, plus you see the Pokémon that are there for you to catch. The game helps you see what you can’t see with the naked eye. The same is true for faith. Faith Formation is about changing our sight; it’s about helping us to see with eyes of faith what can’t be seen with the naked eye. Once we’ve walked with Jesus, we can no longer see the world with the same eyes as before. Where once we saw only a homeless person, through the eyes of faith we see a brother or sister bearing the image of God. Our eyes of faith help us to see with compassion and empathy.

Sometimes, though, we are so overwhelmed by what we see in the world, that it is hard to feel any empathy—we are desensitized to the suffering and also paralyzed by the monumental task of the work of justice. Some artists and others are using games like Pokémon Go, in order to build empathy. I was sent a link to a Sojourners article called, “Building empathy for Syrians through Virtual Reality. And Pokémon.” (<https://sojo.net/articles/building-empathy-syrians-through-virtual-reality-and-pok-mon>) In it, the writer reflects on how only hearing the stories about the casualties in Syria isn’t enough to move us to empathy. Syria feels distant, and that is a barrier to empathy. The knowledge of what is happening in Syria isn’t enough to trouble our hearts and move us. But “photographs trigger empathy; to perceive tragedy, we need to see the victim. The effect is curiously more profound when we see the image of a single victim.” We all have the pictures of the single victim from this current crisis and other world events. The image of the single victim brings the event close and moves us to respond.

“Technology—social media, digital design, virtual reality—has the power to change people’s perception and move them to action,” writes the author of this article. People working for justice in Syria are using current technology and Pokémon Go to raise awareness and empathy. These pictures show technology functioning as a mirror again for daily practice.

Moustafa Jano, a Syrian who lives in Sweden, posted a series of pictures of Syrian children with superimposed Pokémon characters.



(<https://sojo.net/articles/building-empathy-syrians-through-virtual-reality-and-pok-mon>)



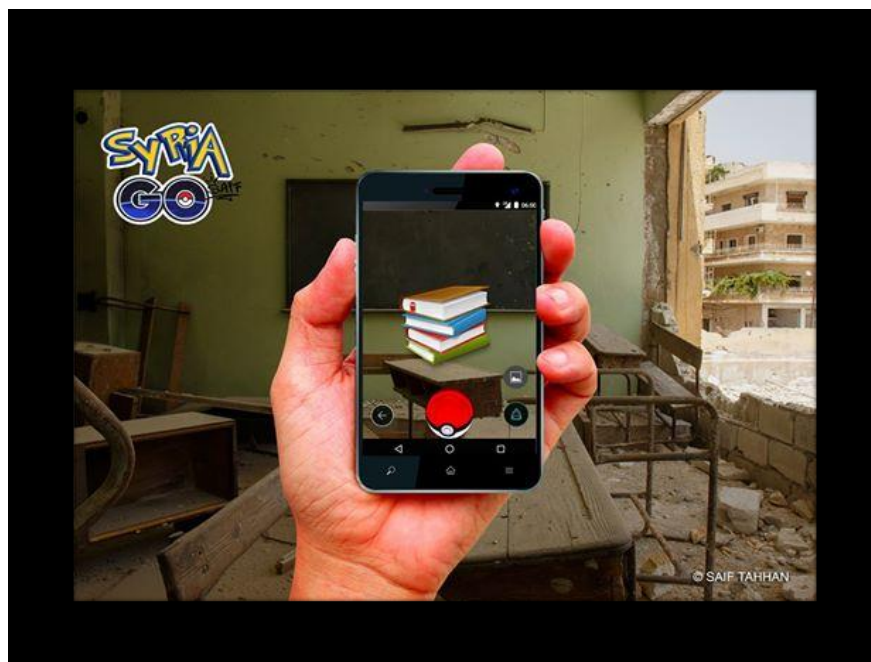
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Saif Tahhan, a Syrian graphic designer who left Syria in 2011 and now lives in Denmark, also uses the game. He has produced scenes from an imaginary Syria Go game, but instead of catching Pokémon, the quest is for security, education, and medical supplies.



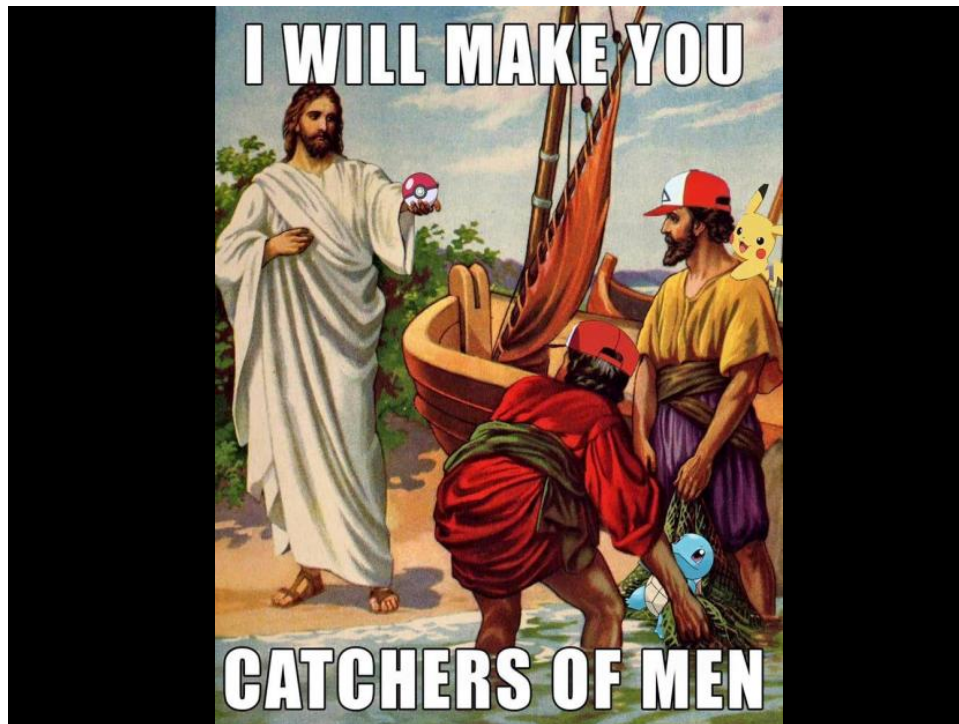
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Faith formation has the power to change our perception of the world and move us to action. It can be the mirror that reflects back to us our daily lives in light of the gospel. Eyes and hearts that are being formed and shaped regularly through worship and Christian education and service opportunities, are eyes and hearts that are compassionate and empathetic.



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These are the eyes and hearts that have caught Jesus, that have seen him and know him; these are the ones who belong to Jesus, who recognize that they have already been caught by Jesus and caught up in the great story of salvation and redemption. May we continue to be a stop, a supply station, a training ground where Christ is offered, where people are fed, and then sent back out into the world.