

# Jeff's Jottings

## *Four wins — four lessons — from Jeopardy*

May 20, 2016

By Jeff Japinga  
Transitional Executive Presbyter

About three years ago, a young man named Mark ran off four consecutive wins on the television game show Jeopardy. That's him in the picture, with host Alex Trebek. In doing so, he deposited a healthy chunk of change in his bank account. Those winnings came in handy; they got this young man through a master's program at the University of Wisconsin without debt.



I was at Mark's graduation last Sunday. Mark is my son. And so it was that I found myself reflecting back on Mark and life and that Jeopardy run during the drive back from Madison. (I don't have satellite radio and forgot the book-on-tape. Trust me, the radio stations in Tomah aren't all that great.) Since I occasionally use this column to write about my thoughts on some random subject, here's what I think I think about Jeopardy and the trajectory of the PTCA.

1. **There's a whole lot of different kinds of smart.** The most common comment I get about Mark's Jeopardy run is: He must be really smart. And yes, he is. But succeeding on Jeopardy isn't simply a product of smart; it's a particular kind of smart, "to answer in the form of a

question” and to be so incredibly quick about it. (It’s also a good skill for trivia night at the local bar.) One of the things I’ve discovered and grown to appreciate in the PTCA is the variety of smarts we have, for a variety of settings. Thank goodness for that. What works in one place won’t in another, and in this diverse presbytery, we’ll need all the varied gifts and creativity we can get over the next few years as we shape our ministries and mission.

2. **Johnny Gilbert is 91, and still knows who he is. More importantly, he knows who you are.** Johnny Gilbert is Jeopardy's announcer, and has been since episode 1 in the 1980s. *No, no, I couldn't answer most of these questions*, Johnny said as he talked to the studio audience before one of the tapings began. *But what I can do is make the contestants who can answer these questions feel welcome and comfortable, and make everyone watching at home feel included.* Though few people know Johnny Gilbert’s name, he knows everyone else's name ... and he makes sure he pronounces it right. It’s all about hospitality. Who are the Johnny Gilberts of your church ... and how are you affirming their importance?
3. **We know less about the world — and each other — than we think we do.** I was amazed at all the blog posts about Mark's appearances and what people thought they knew about his particular answers and strategies. Most were nonsense. It reminded me of a quote from Merriweather Lewis (of Lewis and Clark fame): “The fact that I currently hold the map does not make my interpretation the only useful one.” It’s also why I keep asking for your feedback and input. And humbly accept it.
4. **Jeopardy is easier in the recliner than it is on the set.** Like a lot of life, where doing is tougher than watching, or criticizing.

Maybe this is all a stretch, that Jeopardy has no more to do with life than what’s in my own imagination. Still, I think I learned a lot from watching my son on Jeopardy, the most important being this (phrased, of course, in the form of a question): How can I use the gifts God has given me to serve others?