



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 20
Proper 23 (B)

Blocks

[RCL] Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

Peek-a-boo! [Cover eyes with hands and then remove them as you say the words if you wish]

Have you ever played this game with a baby or toddler? Or perhaps you have heard this from a child: “If I close my eyes, you can’t see me!” Developmentally, children are extremely concrete thinkers. That’s why they have their hands, mouth, nose, feet, and basically, their entire bodies into everything they can see, smell, touch, hear, and taste. They are learning about the world and what it means to be in it with all their senses. It is how we learn the world still, although we have more life experience and abstract thinking to help us out. However, when we encounter something that is new and unfamiliar, something we don’t understand, the first thing we do if we are not fearful, even as adults, is we want to see, smell, touch, hear, and taste it, in order to find out what it is. We want to make sense of our experience in the world and our bodies are wired to do so.

This happens with our experience of God, too. How about that Job passage today? In essence, he’s been playing peek-a-boo with God. “Today also my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling!” How many of us have been where Job is, asking, “Where are you, God? If I close my eyes, are you still there? If I open them, why can’t I see you?” We don’t understand what God is doing or what God is up to and so we try to figure it out with our human limitations. It is difficult to rely on the God of peek-a-boo.

In our Gospel today, a man asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” That strikes as an interesting phrase. Is there anything that the man could do on his own to inherit eternal life? Jesus answers this question by reminding him that only God is good and of the commandments that pertain to community relationships. The man replies that he had kept all those commandments since his youth. Jesus didn’t doubt his sincerity—he looked at him and loved him—and because he loved him, he tells him the truth: the one thing that he lacked was full reliance on God. He needed to sell everything, give the money to the poor, and follow Jesus.

Notice that Jesus didn’t condemn the man for being wealthy. Jesus knew that wealth in itself was not bad, but it made things more difficult for a person who was wealthy to realize their full dependence on God. If

you think about it, many times, when we have an ample amount of money and we feel things are going our way, we feel self-sufficient. After all, we have worked hard for a good life, haven't we? It's ours. But that attitude can block us from responding wholly to the gifts that God alone can give us – a full, whole life now and eternal life in the future.

We're going to do a little Godly Play here and wonder together. Let's wonder what would happen if we looked at this story as a healing story. If you think back across Mark's Gospel, any person who comes to Jesus kneeling, asking for a blessing, is either deathly ill or demon-possessed. And almost every time Jesus orders someone to go away afterward, it's in relation to healing. I wonder what would happen if we saw this man as Jesus saw him—heart-sick. Maybe the perfect life the man was trying to lead created a distorted sense of self, God, and neighbor? Let's wonder together...

This is also the only story in the Gospels when a personal call of Jesus is rejected. The rich man walks away grieving because he wasn't able to give up the one thing that kept him from giving himself completely to God. But even though it is the only story in the Gospels when this happens, it has been repeated over and over again in the centuries to follow. Each of us has "one thing" (often more than one) that we refuse to let go of so that we can be more fully in relationship with God. It doesn't have to be money at all, although it can be. Our spiritual dysfunctions can take the form of other things—any idols that come between us and our loving God. We all have them. Becoming aware of them and having the courage to address them doesn't have to be overwhelming. As Jesus says, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." What would it take for each of us to give up what is blocking us from relying on God with our whole lives—the loving God in which we live and move and have our being?

As Episcopalians, we especially emphasize the Incarnation—the fact that Jesus came to dwell among us, with human hands and feet—living in daily human life. That is an example of God doing something new, something radical. Jesus telling the wealthy man to give up what interferes with his full reliance on God is a continuation of that new work. It is a continued call for us to be radical. For us to rely on Job's God, whom we perceive as a peek-a-boo God, is a radical call. That love is incarnational—it means that there is more to life than emptiness—it means that there is richness in living in community with others—true community—where you can share and pray and serve with others. It is about living your best life—about becoming who your Creator created you to be. But we can't do that if we allow things to hold us back from deeper relationship with God—we are called to total stewardship—body, mind, and soul.

An article in *Live Science*, entitled "Why You Should Smile at Strangers", discusses studies where people were asked to smile at other people as they walked down the street. Such a small, simple thing to do. Sociologists looked at a variety of contextual influences, but the two main sources of data were: (1) How the people who smiled at others felt afterward, and (2) How the people that were smiled at felt. The results were positive. The smilers felt that their outlook improved markedly and the people who were smiled at felt uplifted and were more willing to smile at others as they went through their day. It turned out to be a pay-it-forward attitude.

Smiling at another is such a simple thing – a small change that the participants made in their day. They became more aware and more in tune with their own behavior, just like we do as we make small steps in following Jesus. What is one small, concrete step we can do to address an idol in our life that keeps us from glimpsing God? Perhaps we take the time to pray each day or join a ministry that addresses racism or poverty in our neighborhood. Maybe we finally call a therapist to make that first appointment or reach out to a neighbor who needs help. There are plenty of small steps we can take to draw closer to God and slowly chip away at what is blocking us. The question is: Are we willing to stop playing peek-a-boo with God ourselves?

By releasing ourselves from the bondage of our idols, we will be able to reach out like we did as children—to touch, taste, smell, hear, and see God around us—and find that God has been steadfast and waiting for us all along. Amen.

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