

Oct. 10, 2021 Pent20B

Mark 10:17-22

Following Jesus When You Don't Like the Answer

You may have heard, we're having an epidemic of grandchildren among the church staff. Carol was blessed with her first grandchild last week. Her second is due in February as is mine and Brenda's first grandchild. Kathy had her first a few weeks ago.

It has me thinking about some things I haven't thought about in many years—playing with babies, re-learning those baby games, like peek-a-boo or those other highly sensory games.

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 about 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. And to be quite honest, I am really looking forward to playing peek-a-boo again.

This happens with our experience of God, too. I think about Amos in our Old Testament lesson. People weren't using their senses in Amos' day to find God. So he tells them repeatedly, "Seek." "Seek God." "Seek the good stuff God has." The problem starts when we can't see God. It's like He is playing peek-a-boo. Sometimes we see Him. Sometimes we don't.

I think about Abraham, who we are talking about in Bible class today. At first Abraham gets it. God says leave the place and where you are living and move to place you have never seen. And Abraham does. He's an example of living by faith. And we also hear that that faith gives Him righteousness.

But then God promises him a child. And He's getting old, really old. And when God keeps telling him that he will have a child, but he's not seeing it, he tries to short-cut God's plan. And God's keep promising and finally

Abraham and Sarai both laugh at God. This peek-a-boo God is not living up to their expectations.

In our Gospel today, a man asks Jesus, "Good Teacher, 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? And what about this word "inheritance?" "What must I do to inherit?" You don't earn an inheritance. You get it because of who your father is.

So Jesus has to change the conversation. It's like Jesus is saying, "If we are going to talk about eternal life, we need to talk about me. We need to talk about God. Not you." So Jesus asks, "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answers this question by reminding him that only God is good and of the commandments (mainly the ones 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.

In other words, the man says he has kept all the commandments and Jesus gently challenges whether or not he has kept the first one. Remember the first one? You shall have no other gods. This guy had another god—his wealth. And Jesus knew that there couldn't be room for two gods, so he told the guy to get rid of the other god.

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? So Jesus will often tell us things we don't want to hear.

As Lutherans, 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 Abraham'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.

As Lutherans, we also especially emphasize the cross. We recognize that no matter how hard we try, we are still imperfect and we fail. So this God-in-the-flesh Jesus employs all His senses. The fully human Jesus goes to the cross and feels the pain of the nails. He hears the ridicule of the crowd. He tastes the bitter drink of the soldiers. He sees the world's need of a savior and He dies. For us who are imperfect to the point of being dead, Jesus offers Himself as sacrifice. For all the times we find ourselves unable

to do what Jesus commands, Jesus keeps the commands in our place. What good news we have! We are blessed! Our lives are full!

I came across something that I knew I had to use in a sermon. 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.