

Hide and Seek

“Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” Mt.6:4b

Introduction:

“If there is a God, why doesn't he just show himself?” Many of us have seen this question, in one form or another, on the lips of the exasperated seeker of God. “If God is real, why doesn't he just tell us? Why all of this hiding? Why all of the seeking?”

One could argue that God has “shown himself” in the person of Jesus. God revealed his will more clearly in Jesus' life than in the disembodied voice that told Abraham to leave all he knew and go to a place he would tell him about later. God expressed his character more fully in the death of Christ than in the ten commandments, written in stone amidst all of the fire works and smoke on Mount Sinai. God spoke of the future more clearly in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ than the embodied voice of the

prophet speaking judgment and grace. Jesus was God incarnate; God like us, God with us, God among us.

But then, after Jesus' sudden death and unexpected resurrection and ascension, we humans were back to experiencing God as a disembodied Spirit, which, like the wind, comes and goes. We do not know where it comes from or where it is going.

The Christian, who has this Holy Spirit working in his life, has this same "hide and seek" experience with God. Mother Teresa, it seems experienced God's hiding for years. We experience times where God is absent or at least very difficult to find, between intimate experiences with him.

This "hide and seek" with God is a real problem for us.

On this first Sunday of Advent, however, we have

opportunity to consider hide and seek with God, not as a problem, but as an opportunity. We can consider this experience, not as another part of the existential struggle of life, but as a source of laughter, of wonder, and even joy.

Let's begin the Christmas season by playing hide and seek with God!

Move: The Invitation to Hide

"Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." Mt.6:4b

This Scripture is a key part of the structure of Matthew 6. Picture an old home with a stucco and wood beamed ceiling. This phrase is that dark, textured beam, repeated every 3 feet or so as you look up and follow it with your eyes.

We see it in verse 4. "Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." It is also in verse 6. "Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." **And we see it again in verse 18.** "And your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Just as the beams of a house are connected to cross beams, these statements are connected to an invitation. They are connected to an invitation to hide something. First it is to hide acts of generosity. “But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that your giving may be in secret.” (v.3-4a) Then it is an invitation to hide our prayers. “But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father...” (v.6a) The third time it is an invitation to hide a fast. “But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father...” (v. 17-18a) Jesus is inviting us to hide little acts of generosity, to hide times of prayer, to cover up times of fasting. If we do this, he says, “Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

Move: Emphasis

The “beams” of generosity, prayer and fasting are

covered with plaster. That is, these religious activities are not so much the focus of Jesus' teaching as they are a support to a wider point that Jesus wants to make visible.

Generosity, prayer and fasting are common religious activities. Jesus is using what is common to describe something that is uncommon. His point is not to reinforce generosity, prayer and fasting. His point is to describe a new way of being religious.

“But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is doing in secret, will reward you.” (v. 17-18)

Move: The Religion of the Resume

Jesus contrasts his invitation to hide things with “the religion of the resume”. The religion of the

resume is that approach to religion where you do religious things to “wow” others and receive from them the honor due to those who are “truly spiritual”.

The religion of the resume is another part of the structure of our passage. In verse 2 Jesus describes this kind of religiosity in relation to generosity. “So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues, and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.” In verse 5 he illustrates the religion of the resume in relation to praying. “...do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.” And again, in verse 16 he says, “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their

reward in full.” Jesus describes the religion of the resume quite playfully, with a bit of humor and even a pinch of sarcasm.

This is a common way of being religious in our day as well. It is all very serious. You begin by looking for those things which will impress your religious peers; things like giving, prayer and fasting. Then you set out to excel at these religious practices. You must, however, make sure that you do them in a way that others will see and be very impressed. The religion of the resume is about building up a very strong and very visible resume that is sure to establish you as a spiritual force.

Jesus doesn't deny the religion of the resume works. This approach can and does impress others and give you spiritual status with peers. He simply makes the point that the “wow” of others is all you will get. Their esteem is “your reward in full”. This is sad, because there is so much more to knowing and following God.

So, in 6:1 Jesus warns us of this way. “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ in front of others, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.” (6:1)

Move: Uncommon Religion

Jesus invites us to experience religion as a game of hide and seek with God.

The game begins when we express of our love for God in some secret and hidden way. Jesus gives us three examples. “But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret.” (v. 3-4a) “But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father...” (v. 6a) And “But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting...” (v. 17-18a)

Once we have hidden gifts of love, God “finds them”. Our hidden gifts of generosity are seen by God and rewarded. Our secret gifts of prayer are “found” by God and blessed. Our ‘fasting mask” is removed by God with a sparkle in his eyes.

Jesus is inviting us to play hide and seek with God.

Move: Playing Hide and Seek with God

It is so fun to watch children playing hide and seek. The first thing they do is decide who is “it”. The one who is “it” will seek the others who have hidden. I always wanted to “hide” as a child. I never wanted to be “it”.

Isn't it nice of God to be “it”? We often think that we are the ones who have to go looking for God. God has run off without us and hidden somewhere. And we have to get up and look for him, wishing that he would quit playing this game

and calling it faith. But in the way Jesus describes our relationship with God the roles are reversed. We are the ones who are hiding and God is the one who is seeking. This makes being a Christian much more fun!

Once children have figured out who is seeking and who is hiding the game really begins. The seeker starts to count while the others get creative, looking for really good hiding places.

My favorite hiding place was the dirty clothes hamper. Our home had a hamper that was built into the wall. Above the hamper were cabinets with the clean towels. The hamper itself had a large door for removing the laundry. Then there was a small door at the top of the hamper which flipped down to receive the dirty clothes and towels. What its makers never considered was that the hamper was also a wonderful place to hide. Inside it was enclosed and secure. It was dark and hidden. The small door was perfect for an occasional furtive

glance for the seeker. It was a bit like the room Jesus transforms into a prayer closet in verse 6. “...go into your room, close the door and pray...”

The creativity and playfulness of hide and seek comes out in Jesus' description of our relationship with God. Jesus' description of hiding acts of generosity reminds me of a small child who covers his eyes and thinks that, because she cannot see herself, no one else can either. Now this is something we can do in our relationship with God. “...do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.” (v.3) His description of “hide and seek fasting” sounds like a child playing dress up. Jesus suggests playing dress up in our relationship with God. “...put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting...” (v.6)

Once everyone is hidden the game gets even better. Have you ever listened to what happens when someone is found? The combination of

screams of surprise and laughs of joy, mixed with just a touch of fear, is one of the most wonderful sounds in the world. And once everyone is found they all say, with breathless excitement, "Let's do it again!"

Could this really become the tenor of our relationship with God? It is so fun! It is so creative and joyful! It is so energizing! And this is the kind of relationship with God that Jesus wants us to experience. Christianity is good news after all!

Application: Comfort

If God seems to be hiding in your life, know that you are in a time of growth. God hides from us to deepen our conviction that he is always with us. There are times when God removes himself from the ways in which he has been confirming his presence to us. When he does this it is to teach us that his presence is more secure than our expectations. He steps behind us in order to show

us that no matter what is happening in our lives and no matter what we are experiencing emotionally, he is, in fact, present with us.

This conviction of God's presence is absolutely essential if we are going to play hide and seek with him. If, when we are hiding, we begin to doubt that the seeker is not looking for us, then the joy of the game transforms into fear, loneliness and pain.

The conviction that the seeker is looking for us is required if the game is going to be filled with creativity and joy. God is giving us what we need in order to relate to him by hiding gifts of love for him to find.

If you are seeking after God, you are in a time of deepening your relationship with God.

Application: Challenge

We often think that the best way to deal with the evil of the world is to be serious. We must

unmask the injustices of the world, not put on a happy face while fasting . We must stand up for the oppressed of the world, not hide in a room with the door closed. We must call others to live life simply so that the poor might simply live, not play children's games with our right and left hands. Such talk of playing hide and seek with God is irresponsible at best and callous toward the suffering at worst.

But such thinking has forgotten the power of transcendence. Have you ever fallen asleep with your thoughts all tied up in knots? Then, when you wake up you wonder what all of the fuss was about? When we are caught up in anxiety and frustration our world gets smaller and smaller until the only thing that exists is the struggles we are dealing with when we fall asleep. But when we wake up our mind has gone back into its default mode and the skies have opened up again. This is the power of transcendence. It is a way of getting out of the boxes that we have created for ourselves

and seeing the big picture again.

This is what playing hide and seek with God does for us and for other people. Approaching life with a sense of play is a wonderful antidote for the cynicism, legalism and judgmentalism that plagues our world. Hiding expressions of love for God each day opens up the freedom and creativity of new possibilities. Waiting for the good secrets to be “found out” gives us the courage and strength to push through the unfair and even brutal things that happen in our world.

Playing hide and seek with God is a very good way to deal with the evil of this world.

Conclusion:

As children of God, then, let us hide little gifts of love for God this Christmas season. Christmas, above all times, is a season of hide and seek with God.

During the Advent season we celebrate the God of the universe hiding himself in, of all things, a baby! The One who caused everything to exist that exists, the One who rightly has all of the power and all of the glory, plants a secret of love in a child of poor parents who is born in a manger. And just for fun he makes the pregnancy one that is tough to explain.

The ones who seek the Christ child are a surprise. The blue-collar, foul-mouthed, workers of Jesus' day, the Shepherds, are told to seek the child by a robed choir of angels. Some new age priest types follow their astrology and it takes them straight to Jesus. When they find the child they break out in wonder, in awe and in joy.

If this isn't hide and seek, I don't know what is. I can just hear God saying, at the birth of Jesus, "Surprise!" And when the shepherds and wise men show up he says, "You found me!" And people throughout the ages have responded by saying,

“Let’s play this game again next year!”

Brothers and sisters, Jesus is inviting us to play hide and seek with God. Let’s accept the invitation and spend this advent season hiding little gifts of love for God in our homes, with our friends and family, and in our church community. And let’s wait with eagerness for God to find them. May this be the tone of our relationship with God and with each other, to his glory and to his honor. Amen.