

OPENING:

At Seminary, you have to take Ethics and our Ethics teacher taught that religion was essentially, at its heart, “play.”

Thus the rituals and our very interactions with God could all be described as “play.” The game he cited as an example of this play was... “Peek a Boo”—you know the game where you put your hands over your eyes and pretend like you have gone and then come back again.¹

I know, we all stared back at our Ethics Professor with the same look that you have right now for me.

The upshot for all this is that we need to understand ourselves not as *homo sapiens* (“thinking man”), or as a man as a wayfarer, or all the other ways to understand humanity, but as *homo ludens*, “man/woman at play.”²

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

We played Peek-A-Boo as parents—having had Mark at Seminary—but despite this Ethics lecture, we were interested in moving past such games and getting books and reading them to him.

During that time, I had a brilliant idea to put myself on the map: I would find a secular Children's story that went with each Sunday in the Church year.

(Now, a secret of preaching is that there are all these aids, cheats even: and not just Biblical commentaries, but a book with a *Joke* for every Sunday in the church year, a *book* with a movie reference for every Sunday in the church year and on and on....)

But I was going to come up with a Children's Book for each week, SO *Curious George* would be for this Sunday, and *Corduroy* for that Sunday, and on and on. Before I got too far with my idea, I did a quick Google search and found that, actually.... Someone had beaten me to the punch.

There already were Children's Books assigned to all 3 years in the Lectionary for every Sunday and every Lesson.³

¹ Bellah, Robert N. 2011 *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 21-22.

² “The Mimetic Ground of Ethics.” 2017. Timothy F. Sedgwick

³ See *Story Path: Connecting Children's Literature with our Faith Story*. <https://cecestorypath.wordpress.com/> (Union Presbyterian Seminary) For the 5th Sunday of Easter (Year A): [5th Sunday of Easter, Year A \(RCL\) – StoryPath](#).

So I cursed the Presbyterians under my breath, and I forgot about this idea, but remembered it again, when I started looking at our Gospel lesson for this week which talks about Jesus preparing to leave the disciples, and I remember also the Gospel lesson from two weeks ago, the Emmaus Road story, with Jesus playing a game of Hide and Seek.

GOSPEL STORY:

In our Gospel this morning, Jesus is trying to explain what's going to happen: how: 'now you see him and now you don't.'

And why: 'he is here today, but... gone tomorrow.'

The disciples don't really appreciate this 'David Copperfield' disappearing act, it's not the future they signed up for.

So Jesus has to explain it again, over and over, and John does not spare us any of that repetition.

In fact, that repetition reminds me of the dialogue between a parent and child where children need that repetition and reassurance in order to start to get it.

The message that Jesus is delivering—"I'm going" and "You are not (exactly) coming with me"—is indeed heartbreaking when seen from the perspective of the loyal disciples, or the perspective of a child.

LLAMA LLAMA

It made me think of a few children's books, but one in particular:

Llama Llama Red Pajama.

Written and illustrated in 2005 by Anna Dewdney, it's a story of a Llama who is put to bed by his Mama but then starts to get worried about where his Mama goes next.

I will read a little bit:

Llama, Llama red pajama

In the dark without his mama

Eyes wide open covers drawn

What if mama Llama's gone?

(The mother come back in and says)

Llama, Llama red pajama

Weeping wailing for his mama

Will his mama ever come

Mama run run run!

*Baby Llama what a tizzy
Sometimes mama is very busy
Please stop all this llama drama
And be patient for your mama*

*Little Llama don't you know
Mama Llama loves you so
**Mama Llama's always near,
Even if she's not right here.**⁴*

“Mama Llama's always near, Even if she's not right here.”

Regardless of what age you are, this fear that if something leaves our sight, that we will lose it forever, is with us.

Who among us has not felt, at the departure of a loved one, that anxious question: “will this be the last time I see them?”

Or, who among us has not felt, the feeling that a certain gathering of friends, or a particular relationship, or this called the Church, either the people or the building itself, might all someday be gone?

PRESENCE & ABSENCE

I like how the book depicts this idea of presence and absence, that is a deep part of life, and a deep part of our faith.

Reading it, we sympathize with the Baby Llama who causes a tizzy, but we recognize the child's concerns as irrational and illogical. We tend to identify with the parent primarily.

But I think we actually should see this story from the viewpoint of the Baby Llama, just as we should read our Gospel story from the viewpoint of the disciples, Thomas and Phillip, who flail wildly with their questions.

These are supposed to be the Eagle Scouts, the rock stars who are going to lead the Church, but instead they are revealed to be as scared as small children.

Their first inclination is that, since Jesus is leaving, that they are on their own, that they will need a map or a GPS tracker to find Jesus.

They want the secret directions, the purest doctrine, and they certainly want the keys to the kingdom.

⁴ Anna Dewdney. 2005. *Llama Llama Red Pajama*. New York: Viking.

But all of that presupposes that Jesus is waiting somewhere with his arms crossed, trying to make sure that we are good enough to join him, and if we made the cut. The disciples assume that they will have to do something in order to get there. Back to the idea of games... It's interesting, Peekaboo is playing with children's deepest anxieties and in that way is oh so serious.

If a *stranger* attempts to play this game of Peek-a-boo with a very young child, the result will almost certainly be tears. If the mother or another trusted adult plays, the result is often laughter.⁵

For the child llama in the story, and for the children of God, you and I, the answer/ the secret/ the mystery/ to that question "where are you going?" is not a doctrine or a destination, or some deep secret, or membership in a group.

It's not about geography, it's about a relationship.

It's a person.

It's a voice.

It's Jesus' face, staring at you.

It's God's embrace over the meal.

It's the reassurance in the dark.⁶

CONCLUSION:

We need to engage in this world not on the basis of our intellect or our productivity, but our willingness to play.

Play has no end, play has no other purpose than itself. It has no driving force other than exuberance.

Grace is a gift given not for some instrumentalist purpose but simply as an end of itself. Liturgy, it's just been said, is just a play, we have been practicing for 2000 years, and we know how it ends.⁷

The most amazing thing about God's love for us is that we don't need to search and find it, but rather that it will come to us. Jesus says "I will come again and will take you to myself."⁸

This reminds us that the Holy Spirit can work wonders, defying all structures and arrangements in front of it.

This is Good News because it shows us that we cannot do it by ourselves, we can only do it with God, and with each other. We are sheep that need the Shepherd,

⁵ Bella, 21.

⁶ Buechner, Frederick. 2006. "Let Jesus Show" in *Secrets in the Dark: a Life in Sermons*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 270-1.

⁷ <https://mbird.com/2015/05/grace-is-play-our-magazine-interview-with-nimi-wariboko/>

⁸ John 14.3

children who need their parent, sinners and Saints who need the Risen Lord.

Jesus thus says “You already know what it looks like, it’s ME, I am the way and the truth and life, I will come to you, I am already dwelling in you and you will hear my voice and you will see my face in your own homes, and in your own lives and in each other.”

OR, in other words: “Jesus is always near, even he is not right here.”

AMEN