

Sermon: Playing the Long Game

Year A, Epiphany 5

[Isaiah 58:1-9a \(9b-12\); Psalm 112:1-9\(10\); 1 Corinthians 2:1-12 \(13-16\); Matthew 5:13-20](#)

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I think I would have been arrested under Scout Law if anyone had come into the conference room I was in about four years ago in Cambridge. I was meeting with a recruiter who was helping us fill the gazillion vacancies we had as a startup. I was working two jobs, paying off my debt from seminary and trying to get through the ordination process. I was a tired, crabby, stressed, fierce, sharp tongued woman who did not have time to waste. So there was really no trace of helpful, friendly, courteous, kind or cheerful. I think I was being the wrong kind of thrifty, so that only made it worse. Indeed the poor recruiter had to be wondering what kind of minister wannabe I was since I clearly had not gotten the message on the love-your-neighbor-as-yourself thing.

When you're working with a recruiter and you're super short staffed, their main job is to get you good candidates fast. They'll help in hiring, but really, they're really there to produce a decent candidate pool. The recruiter had given me a pile of 20 or so resumes, asking me to sort them into two piles, the people I wanted to talk to and those I didn't. What he was doing was checking that he and I were on the same page, because then he could really get to work. He took my "yes" pile and sorted it himself. There were resumes that he would have sent on and there were ones that he wouldn't have. And he wanted to know why I picked those.

One candidate had been a newspaper reporter; I said I wanted to see all the reporter resumes, because every organization I have ever worked in needs at least someone who can write on deadline. Another had been a combat veteran. Their skills translate very well into the corporate environment, but very poorly on paper, so I said I wanted to see all those. But the very first resume that we disagreed on was, well, I bet you can guess. Oh come on, it's Scouting Sunday. The candidate was an Eagle Scout. Not particularly qualified in any other way. The recruiter was trying to figure out the nuances in the resume. I just shook my head, "There aren't any nuances. If he's an Eagle Scout, I want to see the resume, regardless of what else is on the resume."

The recruiter and I grew very heated in our discussion. Yelling at each other the way grownups yell at each other without raising their voices. You guys know what I mean, right. But it wasn't until I was writing this sermon that I realized what the fundamental problem was between us.

In most internet start ups, you have such limited financial resources to hire employees and do marketing and everything else, that you pretty much have to be successful in 18 to 24 months. And the reality is that if you're not really showing scary growth by 12 months, it's going to be hard to get enough cash to keep going. So 90% of the people you want to hire need to be really good at only one or two things; then you hire 10% to be generalists who bridge the gaps. That's why so many startups which have really good initial success struggle to get past 24 months. They just weren't built for it. And in part, they got the good initial success precisely *because* they weren't built for long term success.

So the recruiter was doing his job, and doing it well. He was trying to take as much work off my plate as possible. He was trying to find me deep and narrow people to get me through the next six to 12 months. He was doing his job. He was playing the short game.

In fighting with him, I was making his job more difficult. In not better articulating my gut sense of why I chose the candidates I did, I was making our relationship suffer. Because without being able to explain it, I was playing the long game.

The Scout Law embodies the virtues of the long game: Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean, and Reverent. So for scouts and their families to choose scouting, they opt for the long game, developing the kind of virtues that people say when they describe the kind of person you are, not the things you obtained.

Choosing scouting takes courage. It's a brave act. Because so much of the culture is screaming that success comes from the short game. Our culture says that the light shines on those with the biggest toys, that the noisiest people will be remembered the most, that happiness depends on getting your way, so power is the most important thing.¹

It's in the long game that obedience, bravery and reverence get the time they need to develop and flourish. If you choose scouting, it makes it even more complicated to make the travel team, or join the debate team, or attend church. Let's be honest. Because getting here this morning was hard, and it was probably the only slot in the week when you didn't have something already going on. Or maybe you did. But you came anyway. Because a scout is reverent, and someone asked you to do it. That's playing the long game.

We get it. Because those of us who are a part of a church, we're playing the long game too. Scouting Sunday is the Sunday closest to February 8, because in 1910 that's when Scouting came to the U.S. The Boy Scouts can look back over 107 years in the US and a couple more in the United Kingdom. That's a long game. We know that because the Puritans, who eventually became the Congregationalists who became the United Church of Christ which is one of the denominations of this church, the Puritans came to the British North American colonies in 1630. They were seeking to reform the Church of England, which was founded in 1534. The Church of England arose out of the Reformation that started in 1517. The Protestant Reformation tried to reform the Roman Catholic Church founded 15 centuries earlier. So yeah, know a long game when we see one.

We know it takes obedience to something bigger than you to play the long game. In today's psalm, it says *Happy are those who fear the LORD, who greatly delight in his commandments* (Psalm 112:1). Obeying God's command means having a chance to make a difference, to make the world a better place.² How does this psalm written based on the tenets of the Wisdom tradition that comes out of Judaism, which is thousands of years old, now there's a long game, how does this psalm describe those playing the long game? They are gracious, merciful, generous, just, unafraid, firm, charitable (Psalm 112:2-9). Boy that list sounds familiar. Different, but familiar. So please keep us in the loop. We want to cheer on and help out everyone who has realized that the long game is the only game worth playing, even as the rest of the world makes fun of us for being so naïve.

In today's reading from Matthew, Jesus is telling his disciples what they are like when they play the long game. They are the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13). They are the light of the world

¹ Barbara S. Blaisdell, "Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, Pastoral Perspective, Psalm 112:1-9 (10)" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 322.

² Blaisdell, 324.

(Matthew 5:14). That's what scouts and their families are. They are the salt of the earth, they are the light of the world. Let that light shine.