

# Look at Me!

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Preaching on:

Mark 6:30–34, 53–56

Lately, at my house, I've been hearing a lot of "Look, Dad! Look at me, Dad! Look at this, Dad!" It could mean a lot of different things. It could mean Romey has just invented some new death-defying stunt involving *all* the living room furniture, or maybe he's doing a good job on his big-boy bicycle, or maybe he's just drawn some new picture of a tractor-trailer truck with like 25 wheels. But whatever it is, it's going to be more fun and more satisfying, and there'll be a bigger laugh and a bigger sense of pride, if he knows that Bonnie or I are watching what he's doing. And if we're not paying enough attention? We might get some misbehavior to get our attention.

It's a fascinating aspect of human nature. I remember the feeling of it from when I was a kid (maybe you do too): that yearning, that need, to have mom or dad's eyes on me was so strong. If we're being rational or maybe pessimistic about it, we might say, "Well, this instinct probably evolved to ensure that the parent protects the child and feeds the child and doesn't forget about them or neglect them." But it's not just the scraped knees and the hurt feelings that our kids want us to attend to; it's not just tying shoes and cooking dinner and everything else that they can't do yet that they want us for. They also need us—just as much—to pay attention to the things they can do for themselves and to affirm their joy, and to share in their accomplishments. I remember watching TV as a kid and if something funny happened, I would turn to look at my mom so that we could share the laugh. It was better together.

For kids, being watched, being paid attention to, seems to me to be a need—a need as real as needing calcium or exercise or school. Being seen and knowing—knowing not just on a physical level, not just on a social level, but knowing on a psychological, spiritual level—knowing that we are not alone is a key ingredient to our healthy development as we grow up. We worry so much as parents. We work so hard to provide. We want our kids to have every opportunity. We don't want them to suffer any disadvantage or loss or disappointment. We don't want them to lack for any good or service that money can buy. But maybe what our kids need most from us in our busy lives, in a world full of distractions, is our simple, but undivided presence of mind. Yes, I see you. Yes, I affirm this joy you feel is real because I feel it too. Yes, together let's turn that joke on TV, let's turn your make-believe rock concert, let's turn you climbing a tree into *meaning*.

Children teach us that life is full—absolutely full—of opportunities to experience meaning in our lives. And they remind us that we come to a healthy understanding of meaning in our lives primarily through shared experiences. An experience doesn't need to be profound, character-building, or expensive to provide meaning—it needs to be shared, to be experienced with someone outside of myself who can affirm for me that this deep level of satisfaction and joy and purpose which we call meaning—which is so ephemeral and hard to define—is, in fact, absolutely real. Meaning is real. It exists. And we don't need any science, any philosophy, any book, or even any religion to make it real for us. It's real simply because Dad saw it too, because Mom experienced it with me.

Now, as we grow up, the ways in which we find and make meaning also grow up with us. But they're all founded on those early shared experiences. And we all eventually develop a healthy desire for some level of privacy, but the desire to be seen, to be watched, and to share never goes away completely. We still need other people, we value community. Other people continue to help us identify what is relevant in a world full of information and possibilities. But, if we're lucky, we're not like a leaf in the wind, being swept along with the tides of other people's opinions and social media trends. Because, if we're lucky, we've discovered that the One who watches—who when we were young we could only discover outside of ourselves (in Mom or in Dad or some other close adult)—the One who watches now lives within us. So, when I sit down and write a sermon alone in my office with the door closed and the lights off, I don't feel alone. There is a watcher present with me who sees and knows and shares the meaning of that private experience. But that is a spiritual reality that I first learned to

access through the intervention and care and attention of my parents.

A 2021 study by YouGov showed that 26% of the general population believes that life has no meaning. And an additional 15% aren't sure life has any meaning. That's a crisis—a tremendous crisis of meaning in our world. We're becoming more individualized, more lonely, more isolated, more online, more polarized. Anxiety, depression, and despair are increasing. Many of the institutions that helped us to make meaning together—like churches—are in decline. We're less likely to belong to clubs, social groups, sports teams, service organizations than we were in generations past. The pandemic and the precautions we took to stop the spread of the virus had very real and perhaps unintended but not unpredictable consequences, and it added to this growing sense of distancing and meaning loss. But I'm sure that the crisis in meaning also traces back to our most formative years and the intensity of the attention that's lavished on us. Are the adults around us just providing for us and keeping us safe or are they present with us, paying attention, watching us, and by watching us and responding to us, helping us to discover that highest pinnacle of human consciousness—meaning.

We heard in our reading this morning, “As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” I think if Jesus were here today, he would find much the same thing. What is it that makes people “like sheep without a shepherd?” Is that we can't find the best grass to eat? That we can't protect ourselves from wolves? That we can't cut our own hair? No, we can do all those things for ourselves. We're like sheep without a shepherd when we don't have that sense that someone is watching. And without those loving eyes affirming us, we become anxious and restless, we wander aimlessly and meaninglessly, we become lost, and we stray into dangerous territory.

Bringing your sick relative to see Jesus was not like a trip to doctor's office to get a prescription for Amoxicillin. It was a trip into the presence of someone whose gaze had the power to hold you, a power so strong that it stayed with you long after you went back home. You felt it there watching you, experiencing with you, affirming you. It smiled with you, wept with you, longed with you, dreamed with you. It was there in every hour of drudgery, and it was in every epiphany of joy. And you felt less lost and less alone because that presence was tapping you into the most important connection of all—the connection to everything, the connection to God, the connection to meaning.

What our world needs in the midst of war, and mass shootings, and frantic social media antics, and political polarization is a new Spirit of meaning making. One of the problems with living in a crisis of meaning is that people will latch on with all their strength to anyone who promises loudly to provide meaning—cults, conspiracies, corporations, trends, subcultures, gangs, fascists. Providing meaning is not about telling people what to believe or not, it's not about judging the morals of others, it's not about some system or structure of belief. It's all about being present, about giving people an opportunity to be heard, giving them a feeling of community, joining them where they are, wherever they are. And we have to do it in a way that challenges the volume of all the false prophets—the media, the markets, the politicians promising meaning that they're not equipped to provide. We—the Church—need to be more

present, more attentive than those false voices.

Beloved, the certain feeling that there is a power within (and beyond us) who is watching us and imbues our existence with meaning is not a psychological trick. It is the truth. It is the truth without which all the food and opportunity and money and success and accolades of the world amount to nothing. The trick, or perhaps the arrested development, is the idea that there is no meaning. And the disease is the desperate wandering and lashing out that arises from unmet need. Like an ignored kid, the world is screaming for attention.

Does Christianity stop at the stone wall that divides the Church from the outside world? Of course not. Do we come to church once a week merely to recharge our meaning battery for seven more days of drudgery and disconnection? No. We go out into the world as ambassadors of the Kingdom of God. We are the messengers of meaning. The world is shouting desperately, "Look at me! Look at me! Please, somebody, tell me I'm not alone! Please, somebody, tell me there's a reason and a hope to this life!"

Will you be paying attention? Will you look them eyes? Will you help the world to find the meaning it so desperately needs? The meaning, beloved, which I promise you is within you.