

As I pondered today's Scripture readings, I was reminded of a time when my cousins, my brother and I were reminiscing about the games we used to play as children. Like most of us, we played a lot of hide-and-seek. One of my cousins remarked that she hated the game because no one ever came to look for her. We told her we had looked for her, but she always hid so well that we could never find her. At first, she glowed with pride, but then frowned and asked "Wait a minute. Are you telling me the truth?" "Of course we are!" we all lied, trying to look indignant.

It's a bit like that with God and us, too. We humans have been playing hide-and-seek with God since the time of Adam and Eve. Sometimes, when life's not going so well, it feels like God's hiding from us. At other times it's us trying to hide from God. Let's take a look at both sides of this coin which, curiously, really has only one side.

From time to time at the hospital, I meet with people in difficult situations. One older man in palliative care plaintively asked me once why he was still around. He was a wonderful guy, with solid faith, it seemed to me. He just couldn't find God anywhere in what seemed to be this pointless lingering. I suggested to him that maybe his problem was similar to the way it is in hide-and-seek: you're not looking in the right place.

He asked me what I meant, and I told him that he might still be here so that he could show the rest of us how to die with grace and dignity. None of us had anything resembling his experience of dying, so how could we possibly know? We needed him to show us how. God was very much present within him, ready to teach us that lesson if he would allow God to do that through him. Nope, God wasn't playing hide-and-seek with him at all.

If he needed a clue, I said, the Eucharist provides a big hint. I pointed to a host in the pyx I was carrying and said, "Look - there's the body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ, hidden right in front of us, in the appearance of bread and wine. To receive the Eucharist

is to engage in a game of hide-and-seek like none we've ever played before, and nobody ever stays lost'

He nodded as I spoke and then told me he'd been a catechist and a small Christian Community leader at his parish. "All those years I taught people how to live in Christ," he mused. "Maybe, as you suggest, God's asking me now to show people how to die in Christ." No wonder I couldn't find him. He was hidden in a place I didn't think I wanted to go."

I gently encouraged him to think about it. Then I gave him communion, and went away quietly. He died a few days later. The nurses told me he spent his last days cheerfully telling everyone who came into his room that he loved them and was very grateful for their care. Everyone had been deeply touched; they could tell it came from his heart. He had found God in his situation, and God had found him.

Sometimes it's us who're doing the hiding. As we grow out of childhood, the rules and context of hide-and-seek change, and the game becomes more complex. Some grow up hiding from their true feelings, some heart-breakingly hide from those who love them, others hide criminal behavior and myriad kinds of betrayals large and small.

In a word, we choose to sin. We know where to find God, but we don't go looking for him, any more than my brother and I really went looking for our cousin during our hide-and-seek games. At root, all sin is hiding from reality and the love that drew it forth into being. It's a refusal to find God, who is actually never hiding. It may come as a surprise to find out who's really doing all the hiding. St. Catherine of Genoa used to say that her deepest self was God. As it turns out, when we hide from God, it's not God we're hiding from, but our truest, most authentic selves, who live and move and have our being in God.

We may we refuse to look for God, but as Scripture tells us, God continues to look for us until we find out true selves in him. Let me tell you another story.

From time to time I meet with a group of Catholic recovering alcoholics, as their chaplain. Alcoholics are masters of the art of hide-and-peek. One day, one of the folks, let's call him Bill, told me his tale of hitting bottom.

"I thought I could stop drinking any time I wanted," Bill said. "The problem was that I could also start again any time I wanted to. My whole life was all about me. I made up my own private world the way I wanted it to be. I could glimpse the unreality of it every so often, but it never hit home until I lost everything, and almost my life. I remember exactly the moment I decided to get help."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Someone had suggested I go on a Matt Talbot retreat, just to see what 'those kind of people' did. At first, I resisted because I knew I wasn't like 'those kind of people' at all. But my friend persisted and I went. In one of the talks, the priest asked 'How much longer are you going to play hide-and-peek? Hide-and-peek with God. Hide-and-peek with the rest of us and all creation. Hide-and-peek with yourself.' In that moment I realized that's what I had been doing. I thought God had been hiding from me and didn't want to be found. I saw in a flash that it was me who was doing all the hiding. I was one of 'those kind of people'. I don't play hide-and-peek any more, Tim," Bill told me. "Now I find God hidden everywhere! Even in me. Even in you."

So, when God seems to be playing hide-and seek with you, or vice versa, take a hint from Bill and look around. Still can't find him? Might be time to stop hiding and celebrate the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist. Those, it seems, are God's favorite hiding places.