

Disciples in the Marketplace

Episode One: Meet God, Share Grace Quick Look Discussion Guide

Check out the *Disciples in the Marketplace* [landing page](#) to view the **streaming video interview** with visual artist, Omari Booker. You will also find additional backstory/bonus clips, as well as links to a [full transcript of this video](#) and the bonus/backstory clips. See group discussion questions for this episode about seeing grace at work below.



"I think daily life and work life are essential places to meet God and share grace."
-Omari Booker

God nears. Grace works. And disciples see grace at work. No one knows this better than Omari Booker, a visual artist and former Division I college basketball player whose work is featured in museum shows and children's books. He often speaks to young people and others about the healing power of art. His journey to painting came out of the most challenging experience of his life: a drug arrest and incarceration.

Your First Work-Life Story and Song

This episode focuses on the reality that our laboring life is a key context of God's nearing grace, the shape of which becomes clearer when we remember grace at work in our own and others' work-life stories. We begin with prayers for presence, help, and a better life. Prayers for help, though, are context-specific and embedded in our own stories – well before they become "nutshell" theories of grace. Even Omari Booker's "nutshell" of encountering sacred power and sharing God's love ("meet God, share grace") is rooted in the concrete reality of his story and struggle.

In the category of "What's your work-life-story?," take a few minutes and think about your answers to the reflection/discussion questions below. Or maybe start with a work song from your memory – some "whistle while you work" tune that made it easier to get through a shift or season of difficult work.

Opening Group Reflection/Discussion Questions:

- Describe one of your first jobs. Who was your 'boss'? What were you asked to do? Was it difficult? Did it fit your skill set at that stage of your life? Was there training involved? How did it feel (joyful, exciting, fearful, anxiety-producing, confusing, invigorating)? Were you promised compensation or reward? If so, what was the payoff (cash, feeling of satisfaction at a job well done, extended privileges)? Was there a threat if it wasn't done well or on time? How do you feel now when you think about this memory?
- As you recall this first job work story (or other childhood/youth employment), do you think it shaped or influenced how you feel about work today? In what ways? What did you learn from this introduction to labor/work (attention to detail, industriousness, persistence, humility, the value of help, boredom, etc.)?

*It can be chores at home, something done for a neighbor, or even your first real paying 'gig.'

Video Discussion Questions: What Did You See?

Cut to the chase: watch [Episode One: Meet God, Share Grace](#) clip. See the video discussion questions below. See, too, the **Bonus/Backstory clip links and discussion questions at the end of this episode** with more conversation starters from Omari Booker about his working life and how his calling became healing, justice-oriented work.

Choose one or two of the questions below to ask yourself and/or the group gathered to consider what it means to be disciples in the marketplace.

- What did you hear (or see) in Omari Booker's story? What will you remember?
- Do you see grace in Omari's work? Where?
- Do you see any metaphors for life (here, art) in your work/employment?
- How does Omari Booker's work of making art speak for itself or create a conversation among those who view/appreciate it? Does your work speak for itself? How?
- Do you think it's true that art (and other) work can communicate better without "in-person" words? Can it have a greater impact and create conversations with people who might otherwise shut down or refuse to engage in the big challenges of life (injustice, suffering, power)? Stories do this, too. Some call this "indirect communication." Share other examples (music, movies, novels, plays, etc.).

Follow-up questions:

- How or when have you seen others interact with your work (whatever you do)? Share examples that made a good memory – and those that were disappointing.
- Do you ever get a chance to help others see things differently in your work?
- Have you ever found work therapeutic? In what way? (a healthy distraction, focusing, learning, redeeming past work, bringing peace/consolation for disappointments, etc.)
- When has your working life provided opportunities to tell your own story? Can that story-sharing welcome others into a space where they don't always have to live up to the "myth of constant competency" (having it together, all the time)?
- Read aloud one of Omari's quotes below and discuss how your work includes or becomes a conversation with others.

Omari Booker Quotes from the *Meet God, Share Grace* Video

"I haven't found a better metaphor for life than just making a piece of artwork."

"[Visual] Art work in general is saying something without using words ... I think there's such huge value in being able to say things without having a physical person behind it."

"To see someone interact with the painting versus to see someone interact with a large Black man telling them what I'm trying to get across ... you have that conversation with yourself, really. It's your own interpretation and there's just a lot of beauty and also a lot of power in one hearing themselves say that, 'This is what I see in that,' without being kind of beat over the head by a messenger."

"I think daily work and work life are essential places to meet God and share grace."

Omari Booker is a witness whose work testifies to God's nearing; ours can, too. In his art and story, he reveals that everywhere God works is a meeting place, a "wherever" context for God's saving song and story of love. This song and story has a lot of verses, but it is always one of **regard** (for our suffering), **rescue** (from its violating effects), **redemption** (freedom from corruption and menace), and **repair** (of our shattered wholeness).

Check out the [Disciples in the Marketplace landing page](#) to see a full transcript of this episode.

Bonus/Backstory Video Discussion Questions: Backstories of Grace

Check out additional short Omari Booker clips on the [Disciples in the Marketplace landing page](#) where he talks about his journey to visual art as healing work.

Discovering Art (01:43)

Bonus/Backstory Questions:

- Omari says that "making something out of nothing" in art was amazing to him as a child. From the perspective of your working life as an adult, do you see any clues in the interests, hobbies, or preoccupations of your childhood that might have predicted what you did later (or even do now)? It could be anything that filled you with wonder or seemed to capture your attention (maybe even some interest that decorated the walls of your room).
- Omari identifies his mom's talent for making clothes as an introduction to creative work that he could appreciate. In your memory, can you think of a time when someone else's work (a friend, parent/relative) stirred in you an appreciation for the effort and/or the results (the finished product or 'work' of work)?

Work as Calling versus Paycheck (01:47)

Bonus/Backstory Questions:

- Has your work ever been about more than a paycheck? How so?
- Omari says he sees "grace as the things that we receive that we don't deserve – and that's everything." Where have you seen grace in the different jobs you've held? Did you ever get a job based more on who you knew than your credentials or résumé?
- How much of your own working life is just showing up daily and doing the things that matter to you (believing in the work and sticking to it)?

Art as Process (02:13)

Bonus/Backstory Questions:

- Omari says there is a spiritual aspect to his work. When he steps away, he recognizes something has happened that he didn't do: "The good work moves through you." Have you ever had that experience on the job or doing something at home where excellence felt more like a gift than something you generated based on your skills or abilities?

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- How much of your work (or the work of someone you know) is a “messy flow” that requires just grinding through the mess to get to the “great stuff”? Have you ever had to just tear down or dismantle everything and rebuild it from scratch? Share an example. How is that same struggle and beauty at work in other parts of your life (relationships, tasks at work, your spiritual life)?

Art as a Messenger (01:04)

Backstory Questions:

- Some workplaces encourage, “try again, fail again, fail better” (Samuel Beckett), while others only reward keeping up the appearance of constant competency. Which do you prefer (and why)? Is there a “vulnerability” aspect to your work? How many bosses have you had that appreciate that kind of honesty?
- Does your work speak for itself or does another messenger have to “beat someone over the head” for it to be appreciated?
- Is your best work “hard sell” or gentle invitation that encourages others to find out on their own? Have you ever seen your work help others? Did it require them to have a conversation with themselves or with you? Did that ever lead to change? No pressure; answers can be trivial or profound.

The Black Experience (04:35)

Bonus/Backstory Questions:

- Omari says that “work is influenced by what a person experiences, whatever the vessel [personal experience] is.” Is this true in your own life? How has your experience shaped the way you work?
- Does work allow you to express yourself in any way? How? Does it offer a chance to escape from other life stresses? Share examples (if you feel comfortable doing so).
- For Omari Booker, who played Division 1 basketball and grew up in a supportive family, incarceration became a major turning point in his life. Are there major turning points in your life that transformed your relationship to how you work or what you do for a living? Did cultural expectations about your value play any role in this experience? Did this transition time produce resilience or was it limiting and debilitating (or both)? Where did you see grace during that time of trial?
- A famous media mogul once said that whenever an employee is struggling or acting unprofessionally, the right question is not “What’s wrong with this person” but “What happened to this person?” (What’s the backstory?). How has that been true in your experience?
- Who believed in you as an employee when others might have had doubts? Is there anyone in your life (family, friend, coach, teacher) who told you that what you do “matters and counts” when others around you might not have been so sure?
- Where do you see faith communities speaking these words into the lives of people who have been dismissed because of their background, gender, race, and/or ethnicity? Do you think being a witness means telling the story that everyone’s work matters to God? What’s the best way to do that?

His Story (04:25)

Bonus/Backstory Questions:

- Omari Booker lists several challenging events that were part of his journey to finding his own “why” and love for making art: “Identify the thing you love doing and that you would do regardless...[and] find a way to make that your work because [that is to your] spiritual growth....[Do] that daily.” Does

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your work create opportunities for you to do things that matter the most to you? This can be work at home or in the office/on the job site.

- Omari also encourages us to live an integrated life where we don't "silo" the personal from the working and spiritual aspects of our lives. Do you share his tendency to compartmentalize life? What might help you find that all time is "life" time? Is that a pipe dream for some workers?

His Poem: *This Black Bird* (02:23)

Bonus/Backstory Questions:

- Following the video, ask, "What did you hear in Omari Booker's poem, *This Black Bird*?"
- The contexts of work and grace matter. How can God's nearness in Jesus make us free (even in extreme experiences like low-income jobs or forced labor/incarceration)?
- If the work and witness of all Christians is to "deeds and words that heal and free" (*Book of Discipline*, ¶128), **what does it mean to meet God, share grace, and bring healing, and freedom to the current situation or chapter of our own work-life-story?** How can we meet God and share grace with others in contexts of captivity (physical, psychological, social, spiritual)? Is it trivializing to compare the labor of migrant farm workers or low-wage earners with actual forced labor in the prison system?

This Black Bird

by Omari Booker

This black bird lands on my window
The same bird every morning
I guess it's the same
All I've seen is its shadow
But it says hello every day, every morning
I fly away with my little black friend
Every day, every morning
My mind on its back
Free on its wings
Though I only see it through bars
We meet at the screen
It visits me every morning, every day
It brings me hope
It feeds my dreams
They're only bars, they're only screens
It's only tears, it's only screams
And to be born, we need these things
So for now, I guess I'm free
My little black friend
It visits me
Every morning, every day

*Omari Booker, written in Charles Bass Correctional Complex, 2012
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Links and Other Work by Omari Booker

Omari Booker Art:

<https://omaribooker.com/>

[Religion in the Arts Exhibition](#) at Vanderbilt Divinity School

Children's book:

[*The Dreams We Share*](#) by Alex Breene (author) and Omari Booker (illustrator), Hilliard Press, 2020. Also available in Spanish, [*Los Sueños Que Compartimos*](#) (Spanish Edition; Hilliard Press, 2021).