

Distracted like Jesus
Proverbs 9: 1-17; Mark 10: 46-52
October 13, 2018

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A crowd gathers on a road outside Jericho, milling around Jesus and his disciples. Jesus is on his way out of town, on his way to Jerusalem. Think of that moment when you're heading out of town, jumping out of your car and running back in to grab forgotten items, trying to get on the road. Jesus and his friends are trying to get on the road. And just then, a man who is blind, sitting on the side of the road, calls out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Even though he is hushed by those around him, Bartimaeus calls out louder, until Jesus stops, distracted from everything else, and calls him forward, giving him his full attention, really *seeing* him.

Jesus, distractible as always by someone in need, interrupts his journey for this man and asks him what he wants. Jesus, attentive as always, truly sees this man who had been ignored and then helps him to see, restoring his sight. Jesus, the most distractible. Jesus, the most attentive.

Jesus pays attention. I am a theology professor, and I teach a class called Attention and Leadership. In the class, we learn a definition of theology as "a way of paying attention to God and to everything in its God-relatedness." That definition, by the way, is from theologians Charles Wood and Ellen Blue. "Theology is a way of paying attention to God and to everything in its God-relatedness." In the class I teach, we learn about how attention works, and we

spend time practicing attention to ourselves, to others, to the created world, and to God. I try to make the case that attention is central to our spiritual lives.

I want to try out a practice with you that I do with my students that helps explain why attention matters for our spiritual lives. Earlier you received a sea glass or seashell. Now I want to ask you to hold it in your hand and register how you feel about it. Now, for the next thirty seconds, I'd like to ask you to pay careful attention to this sea glass or shell. What do you notice about it? What strikes you? What does it feel like? Smell like? Sound like? [Silence] Now, I'd like to invite you to introduce your piece of sea glass or your shell to a neighbor. Tell them what is special about it or what you noticed.

[Conversation]

Now, notice, how do you feel about your sea glass or shell? How has your attitude toward it changed? Perhaps you feel more interested in it, or curious about it, or you like it more, Now imagine that I said that the ushers are going to come through and collect all the sea glass and shells and put them in a pile outside, and when you leave, you can just grab any piece you want. When I do this exercise with my students, usually someone blurts out, "No! It's mine!"

The point is, attention, given carefully, it cultivates love. What you pay attention to, you will grow to care about. Attention cultivates love.

This is what Proverbs is getting at when it paints a picture of two women vying for our attention. Perhaps the author has in mind an outdoor market, where vendors hawk their wares and call us over to look, to try on, to taste. In this market are two women, personifying Wisdom and Foolishness. “Come to me!” Lady Wisdom cries out. “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed.” She’s like the farmer at the market selling organic vegetables: “It’s good for you, it’s good for the world-- come over here!”

Lady Foolishness pulls us in another direction. She calls from her place, “You who are simple, turn in here! Take a sample of these delicious deep-fried candy bars! They taste so good, and they’re so cheap, at least right now. Come on in,” Lady Foolishness says. Lady Wisdom and Lady Foolishness vie for our attention. And the one to whom we pay attention, that is the one we will grow to love.

But attention is difficult. We live in a distracting world. As a professor, I have to ban phones from the classroom or students can’t stop themselves from looking at them. There have been times when I’ve been crossing campus staring at my own phone, and I look up to see something beautiful—fog settling on a tower or pigeons circling. Then I look around and I see that everyone else is gazing at their phones, looking down, unaware. We live in a culture immersed in distraction.

I'm also a mom to two young children. I know you all have perfectly civil dinners at your house, but at our table, I find myself trying to listen to the story my husband is telling me, while cutting grapes in half for our yelling toddler, and getting up to let the cat out, running to fetch a cup of milk, mopping up the milk when a child knocks it over, responding to complaints and inquiries from my five-year old about the minimum number of vegetables he must eat in order to have dessert, and trying in vain to eat my own meal. By the end of the day, I feel like my attention has been fed into a paper shredder, turned into confetti, and dumped off a tall building. Our world is demanding, distracting.

In the middle of all this, we're called to pay attention to God. But attention to God is hard, because God is invisible and rather courteous, and we're used to giving our attention to things that we can see and hear and that demand our attention. I resonate with a poem by Denise Levertov, who once wrote, "Lord, not you, it is I who am absent." She continues, "I stop/ to think about you, and my mind/ at once/ like a minnow darts away,/ darts into the shadows." She says, "Not for one second will my self hold still, but wanders anywhere,/ everywhere it can turn. Not you,/it is I who am absent."

So how? How can we learn to be present? To pay attention to God? I want to suggest that there are two ways forward here. The first is the path of contemplation. Contemplation is where we quiet ourselves, remove distractions, and seek God. We see this modeled by Jesus in his prayer life.

Jesus could have worked all the time, but he took time to remove himself to a mountain, to pray and be alone. He made space for attention to God.

Attention to God, I tell my students, is an endangered species. One of the main reasons a species becomes endangered is habitat loss—there's no place for it to live and thrive. We often cram our lives so full that we have practically eradicated any habitat for focused attention to God. There's no spot on our calendar and no location in our lives for God, and we cram even our in-between moments with distraction. Driving around, I could pray, but I blare the radio. Walking between meetings, I could reflect, but I check my phone. At night before I fall asleep, I could pray over the day, but I watch TV. I start each of my classes with a few moments of silent meditation, and students often tell me it's the only time of their entire week when they sit quietly and just breathe. I know how they feel.

If we want to pay attention to God, we will carve out spaces and times where we can be attentive. In that space, we pray. We listen. We read scripture. We meditate. We breathe and reflect. The contemplative path.

The second way I call the way of holy distraction. Ordinary life just is distracting. If you're home taking care of kids or volunteering in your community or working a demanding job, you're going to be distracted. But in the midst of our distraction, God meets us. Christianity is not a religion that

expects us to achieve direct, unmediated vision of God. Instead, we meet God in and through ordinary life.

We meet God in the longings of our own hearts, in the messages our bodies give us. We hear God through a friend's story of recovery or a child's tug on our sleeve, asking us to go see what he's made. We meet God in the beauty of an early-morning spider web laced with dew, or the flash of fall leaf, or a sudden, sweet memory of a loved one. We meet God in the call to care about those who are struggling—to help to the neighbor who calls late at night with an emergency, to alleviate to the suffering in Florida after the hurricane, to respond to the twin crises of poverty and violence in Chicago. God calls to us through the ordinary days of our lives.

Jesus took time away to pray, but he also discerned God in the *midst* of life. Think of today's story: Jesus turned aside from his journey to talk to someone who was calling for him. He made it a habit to stop and notice. To those who were focused on moving on, on getting everything done, Jesus must have seemed utterly distractible. He stopped to heal a girl who was sick. He stopped to talk to a woman who touched his cloak. He stopped to heal a woman's only son. He stopped to chat with Zacchaeus up in the tree. He stopped to notice the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. And then, once distracted, he was totally attentive. Jesus, the most attentive; Jesus, the most distractible.

We can't help being distracted sometimes. We're human. But we *can* ask, "By what or whom do I wish to be distracted? What do I want to stop and notice in my world? Whom do I want to grow to love more? What would it look like for me to be distractible by the things that distracted Jesus? How can I let God catch my attention and hold it?" The more we do this-- the more we turn our attention to God-- the more our love for God grows, because attention cultivates love.

The way of contemplation. The way of holy distraction. The world will not become less distracting. So may we restore lost habitat in our lives for attention to God. And may we look up when God calls us. May we be distracted-- like Jesus.