

A Question of Attention

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
On September 23rd. 2018

Mark 9:30-37

Our assigned Gospel lesson for today from the Revised Common Lectionary comes from Mark's account of Jesus' life. As you hear the story, pay attention to how the disciples react to Jesus' words. Jesus begins by predicting his betrayal and death for a second time. You may remember that the first time he did so was in the text we read last Sunday, and it led to Peter rebuking Jesus and Jesus rebuking him right back. Listen today for how the disciples are silent. Notice where they place their attention—and for what Jesus does to refocus them.

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

I really do love the way the Gospel of Mark portrays the disciples.

I mean, they are just so very human, so darn relatable, so much like us. They are not perfect. Far from it. Aside from being somewhat more dedicated than we are at following Jesus and having the real live flesh and blood Jesus to follow and to listen to day after day, they could be us. As noble as they are, as committed to traipsing after Jesus from town to town and trying to listen to his teaching and follow in his footsteps, the disciples make mistakes. They misunderstand. Sometimes they miss the point by a million miles.

I think the problem they face is the same one we face. They get distracted. You could almost say that they suffer from a sort of spiritual attention deficit disorder. They simply can't seem to stay tuned to what Jesus is trying to say to tell them. They are kind of like the dog in the animated movie *Up*, bopping along just fine until he sees a squirrel. You remember those scenes? "Squirrel! Squirrel!" the disciples have an uncanny ability to get distracted.

Today's passage is a case in point. They're all traveling through Galilee. Jesus is keeping it "on the down low" because he's taking some special time to teach the disciples. He doesn't want a lot of interruptions. He's got something important that he needs to let them know. He's telling them a second time that he is *going to suffer and die and on the third day rise again*. The first time, of course, was in the passage we read last week that gave us Peter rebuking Jesus for talking like that. Which is followed by Jesus chewing him out in front of the whole class, even calling him Satan. So you can forgive the disciples if, when Jesus predicts his passion and death (and adds the word *betrayal* this time), they don't really want to ask him any questions about what he's just said.

Mark puts it this way, **“The disciples did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”**

Of course they were afraid to ask him! Maybe they were afraid to ask because they didn't want to be made an example of, like Peter had been. Maybe Jesus had neglected to begin that particular class the way some teachers do, trying to encourage engagement with the material by telling their students, “There are no stupid questions.” To which some students think, “Oh yeah? You wanna bet?”

Or maybe, just maybe, they were afraid to ask because they were scared **to really understand** what Jesus had said, and what it might mean for them and for those who would follow after them. But regardless of the reason for their silence, not a single one of the twelve makes a peep.

As they travel on, though, their conversations amongst themselves make it clear that the disciples haven't grasped Jesus' message. Because they start to argue amongst themselves about who is the greatest, who is the biggest success in life and faith. Jesus overhears them and he calls them out on it. “Hey guys! What were you arguing about on the way?”

Well, they knew enough about what he'd been teaching them to be quiet when he asked them that. They knew that what they were doing did not line up with what he'd just been telling him, so I can see them just sort of hanging their heads in shame. Their spiritual attention deficit disorder had gotten the best of them again. And Jesus knew he had to do something to get their focus back on what he was about.

So after telling them, *“If you want to be truly great, you have to be a servant of all, and if you want to be first, you have to be last of all,”* Jesus did something that would have been very unusual in that day and age. He took a child and put that child in the middle of them and he said, “Look. Look. Pay attention. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me, but the One who sent me.”

It is so easy to get distracted, isn't it? It's so easy to be lured away from what really matters in life and faith by the squirrels, the shiny objects, the cash and prizes, the desire to feel like we are secure, or in control, or somehow righter or better than someone else.

It's just so darn easy to get distracted.

I think one of the ways we get distracted is through modern technology. As wonderful as technology is to connect us to other human beings and keep us abreast of what is happening in the larger world, as much fun as it is to be able to keep up with friends and loved ones all over the country and all over the globe, there are times and ways that technology pulls us away from real, live opportunities to be present to who and what is in front of us.

You've all seen it, I'm sure. The family at the restaurant who are all sitting there looking at their phones. Even sadder, the child who is trying to get their mom or dad's attention while the parent is locked in on checking email, or the news, or the sports scores. I've never been guilty of that, ha-ha.. The way technology distances us from others even as it connects us, so that people write and say things about others and to others on social media that they would never say to each other face to face. So we need to be reminded through real live face to face conversation about what really matters.

When Jesus put a child in the midst of the disciples, he was saying, “This is a real live human being. This is what matters. Not your arguments about who is the greatest, not your arguments about who is most right, not all the things that distract you, but this real live vulnerable human being. Don’t let yourself get distracted.”

It’s easy in our desire to feel comfortable to ignore or discount those who are truly weak and powerless, those who are truly persecuted and under threat.

You have to understand that when Jesus put a child in the midst of his disciples, he and they weren’t living in a culture that elevated children the way ours does. The culture they lived in treated children as sort of an afterthought and many children didn’t make it to adulthood. I think about half didn’t. It was not a culture that exalted children.

But even living in a country and culture that adores children the way ours does, we know that too many children aren’t adored. We know that too often they get abused and discarded, due to the fact that have so little power, comparatively. It was certainly the case, as I’ve said, that *in Jesus’ day* children had very little power. So he put a child among them and said, “*Whoever welcomes one such child—one such vulnerable little one—one such powerless person—in my name welcomes me.*”

It’s so easy to get distracted from that fundamental call to welcome the weak and the powerless. It is so easy to forget that the life of faith is not about what we get but what we give, so easy to ignore that following Jesus is not about control and security but about vulnerability and trust, so easy to discount the truth that we too, like little Lia whom we baptized this morning, have been welcomed by God in our vulnerability.

So it’s a good thing we have baptisms as often as we do. It has a way of putting our focus back on what we are supposed to be about.

It’s a good thing we have baptisms as often as we do, because when we baptize a child like we did little Lia this morning, it shakes us out of our spiritual attention deficit disorder and focuses us for a time on what matters. Welcoming the vulnerable ones. Embracing their vulnerability and ours. Trusting in God’s love for us before we are ever able to respond. Dedicating our lives to following the One who taught and keeps teaching us to follow him in self-giving love.

So a few thoughts as I close:

1. September is National Suicide Prevention Month. It’s tough to mention that, because it can feel like a trigger, but the alternative of not saying anything about it is not good either. There is a reason to draw our attention to this, because there are a host of people in the world and more than a few in some of our lives who struggle with thoughts of self-harm.

Some of that is tied up in brain chemistry, of course. But I think, from personal experience, that what happens when people contemplate self-harm is that they have utterly lost perspective. They’ve lost perspective on how precious they are to God and others. They’ve lost perspective on the impact that the loss of their life would have on people who love them. It all tends to fade. What happens is that the distractions of our culture’s emphasis on success, beauty, wealth, achievement and getting into the right college or graduate school, lead them to get caught up in feeling like somehow they’re not good enough, or feeling like failing or letting people down is the end of the world, like losing a job is the end of the world, like not having a job to report to after they retire is the end of the world, and they think that they cannot appear vulnerable or to not have it altogether.

2. Three of the largest groups of people who take their own lives in our country are the following: one, military men and women who have come back from service, two, people in the LGBTQ community, and three, white males in their fifties and sixties. That's a little scary.

What can we do about that? Well, one thing we can do is to keep having baptisms, because they keep putting our focus back on what matters, which is human life and human connection and embracing vulnerability. Baptisms put our focus on the fact that we are adored and valuable not because of what we have done or not done, but because of who we are.

As I think about it, maybe what needs to happen is for some groups of people to embrace their vulnerability and other groups of people to know that they are embraced in their vulnerability. There is room for everyone.

3. Let me say a word about attention. "What we focus on," a friend of mine used to say, "grows." If we focus on what is positive that grows. If we focus on what is negative, that grows. What we focus on grows.

I know that probably everyone in this room has heard the old Cherokee story before, but I'll share it again.

An old Cherokee elder is teaching his grandson about life (he could have been teaching his granddaughter, too).

"A fight is going on inside me," he tells the boy. "It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil – he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego."

He continued, "The other is good wolf – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you – and inside every other person, too".

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Grandfather, which wolf is going to win?"

The old Cherokee simply replied, "That's simple. The one you feed."

4. Back to little Lia, that little angel we baptized earlier today. As she grows up it is our duty—in addition to her family's duty, it is our duty, and the larger church's duty—to keep bringing her attention back to what really matters. Like the fact that she's a beloved child of God, even when she fails. Like the fact that she matters to us and to God no matter what her sexual orientation is. Like the fact that she is called to live a life, not just of vulnerability, but of embracing others in their vulnerability.

So what do we do with our spiritual attention deficit disorder? Well, we might ask little Lia about that. In Jesus' name. Amen.