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“Spiritual Literacy: Attention”

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Psalm 86:1-7

Today I begin a sermon series on Spiritual Literacy,
and for the next 5 weeks we will explore ways to be more sensitive to
the movement of God in everyday life.
Throughout this series we will examine Attention, Beauty, Connections, Discipline
and Enthusiasm, all practices which can enhance our sensitivity to
the movement and activity of God in our daily lives.
Today we are looking at the spiritual practice of attention.

So many times in Scripture, people have cried out to God to pay attention to them.
As we heard in Psalm 86, “Hear me, answer me,
give ear to my prayer, pay attention to me!”
God does pay attention to us, but we will never know it until we learn
how to give our careful attention to God.

Most of us do not give much thought to what captures our attention, really.
In any given day we are asked to pay attention
to thousands and thousands of things,
often so many different things all at once, some we choose some we do not.
And yet it is rare for us to give our complete, undivided attention to anything or
anyone. It is rare for us to fully enter into another reality, to completely lose
ourselves in that which is right in front of us at the moment.
Disciplined and selective attention is the key to the spiritual life,
and one of the primary ways in which we come to know and experience God.
We cannot mature in our faith if our attention is divided or wasted on insignificant
and unholy things.

Now, in our culture nearly everybody suffers from varying degrees of Attention
Deficit Disorder.

We are so overstimulated all the time, that it is a challenge to focus on one thing
for very long.

It is so easy to be distracted by trivial pursuits, swayed by any media message,
influenced by the last opinion we read or heard, bombarded with so much
information and so many choices that we start to tune out altogether.

Eventually, without awareness, we end up living in a daze of stimulation with no
grasp of its significance. We are operating on automatic pilot. Because nothing
really registers deep in our consciousness, we feel overwhelmed.

Walter Bruggeman is a Biblical Scholar and author who wrote a poem called:
“The Din Undoes Us,” which describes our situation.

*“Our lives are occupied territory, occupied by a cacophony of many voices,
 and the din undoes us.*

In the daytime, we have no time to listen, driven by goals and work.

In the night the voices are so confusing we can hardly sort out the truth.

What is the voice of God, the voice of our ancestors, our children, our friends?

They all sound equally important and urgent.

We do not listen well. We do not pay attention well

And so we ask you, great God, by the time the sun goes down today,

to speak to us in ways we can hear beyond ourselves.

It is your speech to us that takes us where we have never been,

your speech to us that is our only hope.”

We cannot hear what God is trying to communicate without careful attention. Being selective in what warrants our attention, and opening ourselves up to the movement of the spirit allows us to fully experience moments of grace, opportunities for gratitude, evidence of our connections to others, signs of the presence of Spirit. The good news about attention is that it can be practiced anywhere and anytime, in the most mundane routines of our lives. Deliberate, focused attention can transform and greatly enrich one’s life.

In the book *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*, Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat suggest ways to increase our attentiveness to everything.

One of the first suggestions is to never do more than one thing at a time.

It sounds so simple, but it’s a tough one, especially for those of us who are used to doing several things at once.

Even now, I would guess that some of you are thinking about your grocery list, or what’s for lunch, or what you did last night.

You talk on the phone while you cook or clean the house, or drive, you multi-task in order to get more done in less time.

To grow in our awareness of the sacred we need to slow down, and practice deliberate mindfulness, concentrating completely upon whatever is in front of us.

Moments of grace and insight are lost to us because we are in too much of a hurry, too fragmented.

Anthony Lawlor says that by focusing upon what is in front of us we change it. He says, “The simplest most direct method of creating sacredness in everyday surroundings is by cleaning. I know this activity is usually relegated to the

realm of drudgery, but it can become a practical means of infusing attentive consciousness into your surroundings.

Sacredness is experienced in the qualities of purity, orderliness, balance and renewal. These are all achieved by cleaning.

Neglected objects receive love and attention.

Things are restored to their original beauty, and through attention, a room is transformed.”

Through attention, anything can be transformed, even housework.

In the classic book *The Practice of the Presence of God*, the Carmelite monk known as Brother Lawrence wrote of how he found communion with God through what we might consider drudgery. He worshiped more in the kitchen than the cathedral, and was famous for this prayer: “Lord of all pots and pans and things...

Make me a saint by getting meals and washing up the plates!”

He said that he prayed best in the kitchen, where he experienced God more powerfully than on his knees before the blessed sacrament.”

It is important to be fully present to whatever we are doing at any given moment.

Another way to grow in attentiveness is to listen with your heart.

Try to enter into the reality before you with quiet appreciation.

Giving someone or something your undivided, heartfelt attention is a gift.

So rarely do we give or receive undivided attention.

Believe me, I know what a gift you give me when you sit there and listen to me week after week. Attention is priceless gift we give to others.

I am ashamed to think of all the times I have only half listened, given people only a fraction of myself, thinking of other things, pulled in a million different directions.

“For lack of attention,” writes mystic Evelyn Underhill, “a thousand forms of loveliness elude us every day.”

When you really focus with your heart you can be an instrument of God’s grace to others and receive God’s grace for yourself.

We also need to be highly selective in what warrants our attention. We simply cannot give our awareness to everything, we have to pick and choose.

But we should do so wisely, guided by our deepest values.

We live in a trash culture, and all kinds of things clamor for our attention.

Through the internet, TV, media, there’s a lot of sleazy stuff out there, ideas and images that will only serve to pollute our minds and hearts.

I always tell myself to THINK before I give something my time or attention:
 Is this True, Honorable, Intelligent, Necessary and Kind? THINK.
 Be selective in your attentiveness and use it to honor God and improve yourself.

The letter to the Philippians says:

“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure,
 whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, think on these things.”

Do not waste the gift of your attention on things that diminish yourself or others.

Increased attentiveness also means that we see what others do not see,
 we deliberately pay attention to the invisible people of this world.

That includes the poor, the weak, the vulnerable, forgotten.

But as people of faith, we must give our attention to those whom society ignores.

We must be attentive to those whom

Jesus came to serve and save, even if they make us uncomfortable.

A large part of being a Christian is being attentive to everyone, but
 especially the very least among us.

God really is in the details of life, and becoming spiritually literate first and
 foremost means paying attention to the movement of God first in our lives,
 and then in the lives of others and the world.

Look long and steadily at things and people, let them sink into your soul.

“Attention,” says clinical psychologist Timothy Miller, “is the
 intention to live without reservation in the here and now.”

In the 1995 movie *Smoke*, Auggie Wren manages a cigar store in Brooklyn.

Every morning at exactly 8 am, regardless of the weather,
 he takes a picture of his store from across the street.

He has 4000 consecutive daily pictures of his corner collected in a photo album,
 labeled by date. He calls this his “life’s work.”

One day Auggie shows the photos to Paul, a man who has lost his wife to random
 street violence.

Paul doesn’t know what to say when he sees the photos;
 he admits that he has never seen anything like them.

Flipping page after page, he finally says: “They’re all the same.”

Auggie watches him and says, “You’ll never really live until you slow down.”

He then points out that yes, the pictures are all of the same location,
 but every one is vastly different in detail.

Some have lots of people, some have none.

Their clothes are different, according to the season.

The time of year also affects the way the light falls upon the street. Sometimes the street is empty, other times it is filled with cars, trucks and bikes. “It’s just one little corner of the world, where things unfold, just like everywhere else in the world.”

Sure enough, when Paul looks carefully he notices one particular detail that changes the way he views the world altogether.

You might think Auggie Wren is a character with far too much time on his hands, but I consider him a spiritually literate person.

He carefully examines his world for meaning, especially ordinary events. He understands that sometimes the most profound journeys of all are interior ones, the ones we take without ever leaving home.

He pays attention to the world around him, and it brings a change within him.

Taoist philosopher Chaung Tzu once said:

“One has to be in the same place every day, watch the dawn from the same house, hear the same birds awake each morning, to realize how inexhaustibly rich and different is sameness.”

In the next few days, be intentional about living more attentively.

Focus upon only one thing at a time, listen to others with your heart,

be selective in what you give attention to,

and remember the sad, the forgotten and forsaken.

You will notice things that you have previously overlooked,

you will realize that spirituality permeates everything.

Poet William Carlos Williams used to carry a notepad around with him.

At the top of every single page he wrote:

“Things I noticed today, that I’ve missed until today.”

I hope that as we take this journey of spiritual literacy that you too will begin to notice things that you have previously missed, especially the movement of God in your everyday life.

Let us pray...