

21 March 2021

Giving Up . . . Distraction
Ecclesiastes 8:16 – 9:3; Luke 10:38-42

Our first reading today comes from the Book of Ecclesiastes, beginning with chapter 8, verse 16 and going through chapter 9, verse 3:

¹⁶ When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how one's eyes see sleep neither day nor night, ¹⁷ then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out.

⁹ All this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God; whether it is love or hate one does not know. Everything that confronts them ²is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so are the sinners; those who swear are like those who shun an oath. ³ This is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone. Moreover, the hearts of all are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead.

The book of Ecclesiastes is not for the faint of heart, or for the faint of faith. It's a bleak assessment of the emptiness of the world and of humanity in particular. I've read that Jewish youths used to be forbidden to read it until they were adults, and I can certainly see keeping it away from teenagers. Especially the ones going through a goth phase. They do *not* need any help manufacturing angst. But here it is, anyway, in Holy Scripture, and for that I am devoutly grateful. It's a reminder that in the Bible, as in everything else, God speaks in more than one voice.

Anyway, without even trying to deal with all the challenges contained in this passage, I want to look at a few parts of our reading that echo especially loudly to me today: *When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how one's eyes see sleep neither day nor night, then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out.* And then, *Moreover, the hearts of all are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead.* The author describes a world of people frantically seeking – for what? for meaning? for God? for hope? do they even know what they're looking for? – and being disappointed. A world of toil and sleepless nights and futile urgency, and people who think they are wise but aren't. A world of evil hearts and madness and the corruption of both the righteous and sinners. So, basically, the internet.

Over the past four weeks I have been talking about things that we followers of Christ might think about giving up, starting this Lent. I've talked about holding grudges (that is, scorekeeping in relationships), guilt, envy, and control. Today's sermon is called "Giving Up . . . Distraction," but that's only because I couldn't think of anything better. "Disintegration" is what I wanted to call it, but not in the sense that you're thinking of. No, today, I want to talk about the internet. And no, I'm not going to call on us all to give up the internet. Not only would that

require us to all move to a commune somewhere, but it would probably hurt our Facebook worship attendance. The internet has been invaluable through the pandemic, and I'm grateful for it. No, I want to talk about finding ways to resist some of the less useful effects of this tool.

Most of us at this point are used to the amazing fact that we have access to a million encyclopedias' worth of information at our fingertips, in an instant. Moreover, through our social media accounts, we have access to instant affirmation – through the “Likes” and thumbs up emojis of our “Friends.” Of course, that instant affirmation comes hand in hand with instant outrage, as we see the latest news article or, more likely, meme that our friends have posted. All in an instant. But instant doesn't just mean “immediate”; it also means brief. We have momentary gratification, then fleeting outrage, then laugh briefly at a meme that we'll forget a moment later, as we keep scrolling down, clicking links upon links upon links, restlessly moving on without focusing very deeply on anything. Our attention is drawn in a thousand different directions at once but it rests nowhere very long.

And this is intentional. This is, in fact, the business plan of the social media and search engine and internet content industry. They make their money from advertising, and their advertising rates are based on how many clicks they are able to get from us. So, using all the information that they can glean about us from our internet activity, they make sure that they send us ads and articles that are likely to pique our interest and grab our attention. Simply put, our attention equals money for them, so they are desperate to capture that attention.

The New York Times technology reporter Charlie Warzel calls this the “Attention Economy.” Google and Facebook and Twitter and so on are after money, but not *our* money. All they want from us is our attention, because they can sell that to their advertisers. Every time we follow a click-bait article, we are not only adding to their profits, but we are guaranteeing that we will soon see more articles just like the one that grabbed our attention. Now, in a sense, this isn't that different from radio and television. They wanted our attention, too, and sold it to advertisers. The difference is only in scale and volume and pervasiveness. And it is changing our world.

You see, the attention economy of the internet has taken over other parts of society, as well – notably politics. Now success in politics has always been about more than having good policy ideas. I don't want to pretend politics was ever pure. But even the old impurities have shifted. We used to be able to tell which politicians were ambitious for higher office by looking at how much money they had in their campaign fund, but then along came President Trump, who broke those rules. His success in 2016 was not because he was able to attract more money from donors, but because he was able to attract attention better than anyone. Whatever you may think of his policies or his legacy as president, you have to admit that he is an incredible showman. Even reporters and editors who loathed him found him irresistible and granted him their tribute of constant attention. And that changed politics. Now, if you want to know which politicians are angling for higher office, don't look at their bank accounts, watch to see who is doing the most outrageous, attention-grabbing stunts. These stunts may bomb, but it doesn't matter. The attention economy in politics, as on the internet, is only interested in short-term attention. They want your clicks, not your loyalty.

I suspect we'll find areas beyond commerce and politics that are being transformed by the attention economy. I worry, for instance, about what it will do to the church. But it is a fact of modern life, and so the question for us today is what do we do in the face of this cultural shift. More specifically, what do we do as followers of Christ.

Our second reading today is from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 10, verses 38-42:

³⁸Now as they went on their way, [Jesus] entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. ⁴⁰But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' ⁴¹But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴²there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

Again, there is a lot more in this story than we have time to deal with today. I just want to look at one key distinction in Jesus' words to Martha. *But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.* It's the distinction between being drawn in various directions by many fleeting things and being focused on one essential thing. The attention economy isn't new. Our world has always sought to draw us in a thousand different directions. Both the author of Ecclesiastes and Martha illustrate that. But our world, driven increasingly by a society and economy that is desperately grabbing for our attention has increased that pull exponentially. But Jesus calls us to be still and focus on one thing.

Most of you are familiar with the Hebrew word *shalom*, which is usually translated "peace." That's as good as anything I guess, but the literal meaning of the word is "wholeness." Peace comes from being whole, not fragmented; from being one person, not a collection of different personalities rattling around in one skin. Here's another word to think about: *integrity*. At heart, this one, too, means, "wholeness," from the Latin *integer*: one. We are people of peace and integrity when we are one person, unified. Becoming that person of wholeness has never been easy, but we live in a time where that journey has particular challenges. Our whole society is scrabbling each day for our fragmented attention, screaming "Look at me!" "Look here!" "You won't believe this simple trick to remove wrinkles!" "Never before seen photos from Woodstock!" "Watch while this guest OWNS Rachel Maddox!" If we are not mindful of where we grant our attention, we can be torn to pieces – *disintegrated*.

Now, hear this. I am *not* saying – nor do I think Jesus was saying – that our attention must always be focused on God and spiritual things. I do not believe that following Christ requires us to be such appalling bores. Yes, we need to know how to focus our attention, but sometimes we need to focus our attention on our family, our jobs, the dishes. Sometimes we need to give our attention to a really good spy novel, or a dumb movie that still always makes us laugh, or a sudoku. Sometimes we need to be still and give our attention to music. Or to clouds. Maybe especially those last two. I'm not saying that our attention must always be directed profitably; I'm only saying that it should be directed intentionally. You see, our attention, this suddenly valuable public commodity, is a finite resource. We only have so much of it, and every measure that we grant to click-bait internet articles or unfocused scrolling through Twitter is attention lost to things that make us whole: relationships, meaningful work, and rest.

No, I don't know how to do this, but I'm trying. But here are some of the things I'm trying. (1) At least ten minutes morning and evening I just sit in silence – not even in verbal prayer, just silence. Ten minutes may not sound like much, but trust me: ten minutes can be long. (2) I'm trying to use my phone for what I intend and nothing else. That is, to stop picking it up to

check the weather only to find out twenty minutes later that I'm still on it, having been through email and Facebook and still haven't looked at the weather. (3) Recognize click-bait – ads and articles targeted to my known preferences – and ignore it. It helps to think of them as telemarketers. I have no trouble ignoring phone calls about my vehicle service warranty; these are just more sophisticated would-be intruders on my time and attention. Maybe some of you have some other suggestions or practices that you follow to maintain control of your attention. How you do it doesn't matter. But if we are to be the lights in the world, the salt of the earth, if we are to be in the world but not of it, then we are supposed to be different. Being in control of our own attention would make us very different indeed.