

19 March 2023

Spiritual Disciplines for the 21st Century: Focus Philippians 4:4-9

Our scripture lesson today is from Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. We read Philippians 4, verses 4-9:

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Paul wrote this letter to a church he knew well and loved well. More to the point, he wrote it to a church that he knew loved him. Many of his letters were written to churches that were angry with him (and vice versa), and in those letters he sticks to theological arguments and general moral instruction, but this letter is different. Philippians is less an official apostolic communication than a fatherly letter. Look at the advice he gives here: rejoice always, trust God, pray about everything, and let your mind dwell on things that are worth thinking about: honor, justice, purity, excellence. To me, at least, this feels like something my parents would have told me. Paul couldn't have done this with, say, the Corinthian church. This sort of advice only works in a relationship of mutual trust and respect. Moreover, he follows his own advice throughout the letter. He is in prison, in daily expectation of being dragged out to be executed, but he mostly talks about the joy and the peace that he has been given. He tells his readers, "If there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things," and he does exactly that.

Now, it is important to note that Paul is in prison, in danger, when he writes this. If you take those lines out of that context, he might sound like a superficial Pollyanna, or a Norman Vincent Peale telling people to just think happy thoughts. No, in chapter 1, Paul talks frankly about his own approaching death and his confused feelings about it. He talks about former allies who are now attacking him in public. He's not playing make-believe that everything is fine. Hardship, pain, danger, and betrayal are real; he's only saying let those not be the things that you dwell on. Steer your mind toward a better harbor.

That's harder than it sounds. Buddhist teaching often uses the phrase "the monkey mind" to describe our default mental state. Like monkeys constantly jumping from branch to branch, our restless minds leap from thought to thought, barely taking time to acknowledge one thought before rushing to the next. And when our minds *do* linger over a thought, it's usually one of fear, anger, anxiety, or resentment. That's where our minds tend to dwell if we leave them to themselves. The Buddhist answer to the monkey mind is what the Buddha called "mindfulness." Now, unless you've been shut off from all popular culture for the past decade – which I'm not saying is a bad idea – you've probably heard this term. It's quite the fad. But when something gets popular, it tends to get distorted by people wanting to cash in on that popularity, so let me try to define mindfulness for you, using the teaching of Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh.

Mindfulness is training our minds to pay attention to what is in front of us, to do everything that we do intentionally and thoughtfully, even such trivial tasks as washing dishes or bathing. (Thich Nhat Hanh says, “Do not wash dishes in order to have clean dishes; wash dishes in order to wash dishes.” That is, joy is only found in the present, so seek your joy in the act of washing, not in what you hope to achieve by it.) Mindfulness means focusing on the present moment, noticing the good that is around you, letting your mind dwell on what is simple and healthy and real. Anyway, this passage in Philippians, this advice given by Paul late in his life to people he loved, seems to be his own version, from prison, of the miracle of mindfulness. And it’s something that we might do well to try for ourselves.

You see, while the monkey mind has been around for millennia, in the 21st century it has been *encouraged*, by industries that have figured out how to turn a profit on short attention spans. The tech giants of Google and Facebook and Apple and Twitter and the like are basically advertising platforms. They make their money by selling ads, and because they know our internet browsing patterns, they can pinpoint with eerie accuracy which ads we’re likely to respond to. That’s very attractive to advertisers. But here’s the thing: the more clicks and shares the internet companies can register, the more they can charge the advertisers, so it is in their financial interest to keep people moving from site to site as quickly as possible. These firms actually have behavioral scientists on staff, crafting ways to addict us to their sites, because the more they can grab our attention, the more money they make. It has been called “the Attention Economy.”

And they’re very good at it, aren’t they? I’m not asking for a show of hands, but how many people here have gone to your computer or your phone to look up some word or fact that you couldn’t remember, and then – 45 minutes later – you realized you were still at the screen, having read a half dozen short articles or comics and viewed dozens of memes. Disgusted with yourself, you turn away from the screen and go back to what you were doing only to realize that you never did look up that word. Facebook and Google love it when you do that. Cha-ching.

This new world of frenzied, restless browsing is already having visible effects on us. Back in 2005, a researcher did a study of workers at computer stations and discovered that people spent an average of barely two minutes on each task before moving to something else. Not a great attention span. But she went back and repeated that study fifteen years later. Now it’s an average of 45 seconds. But you can understand it, can’t you? Think about all the notifications that you are now subject to that you were not just fifteen years ago. Lights and beeps on your phone. Pop-up screens on your home page. All of them screaming for our attention. Speaking of notifications, here’s another study. Researchers took a group of volunteers, some of them heavy computer users and the others light or moderate users, and put them in a room. They said that the frequency used by their phones would interfere with the clinical equipment, so they removed their phones and put them in the next room, with the door between the rooms open. Then the researchers hooked the volunteers up to machines measuring breathing and heart rate and blood pressure and went off to begin texting the volunteers’ phones. Those poor volunteers, strapped to machines, listening to their phones chirp and beep and buzz in the other room but unable to go answer them, began immediately to show signs of stress. The heavy computer users were the worst. By the time they were permitted to go check their notifications they were in deep anxiety. Like Pavlov’s dogs we’ve been trained to respond to the sound of a bell.

By the way, all these test subjects I’ve mentioned were adults. There is a narrative out there that smartphone addiction is a teenager problem. Certainly the insecurities of adolescents

make them susceptible to the traps of social media, but that easy, sneering comment about “teenagers these days, always hunched over their phones” is misleading. It ain’t just kids.

To summarize, our century presents us with a particular challenge. As Paul and the Buddha both recognized thousands of years ago, our monkey minds are restless and, left to their own devices, will exhaust themselves bouncing from fear to fear, anxiety to anxiety. Both religious teachers counseled training minds to focus thoughtfully and intentionally on what was solid, trustworthy, good, and true. So far this is nothing new. But today behavioral science and technology have combined to discover how to feed amphetamines to our monkeys and keep us in a permanent and frantic state of unrest. What can we do?

A few basic suggestions. First, all the things we’ve already talked about this Lent apply here as well: silent prayer, Sabbath, getting outside. Second, for those with smartphones: practice ignoring notifications. You can check them when you’re free; don’t let them interrupt what you’re doing, especially if what you’re doing involves being with someone else. Better yet, silence your phone, or even leave it home sometimes. How did you feel the last time you went somewhere and realized you had forgotten your phone? If you felt sick and desperate, think about that. Third, give up the 24-hour news cycle. I’ll talk more about cable news next week, but this week it’s worth noting that the 24-hour news stations play the same games with our minds as social media, desperately seeking to hold our attention with new notifications and lights and buzzers and scrolling words and the implication that every breaking news bulletin is of crucial importance to you. It’s not. The reality is that there are very few news items that you need to know *immediately*. Reading a report the next day will be fine, and probably more accurate. And finally, read books. Whole books. Our truncated attention spans have grown accustomed to memes and short, superficial posts of 150 characters containing neither context nor reflection, and we’ve normalized that. In the past couple of months, two different media idols have proudly announced that they don’t read books. Waste of time, they said. The first was noted internet troll Elon Musk. The second was Sam Bankman-Fried, the whiz kid who started a cryptocurrency exchange, made a billion imaginary dollars, and now is under investigation and broke, along with all his investors. Read books that make you sit still and focus and think and understand other people’s perspectives. Read them slowly. We need to retrain our minds.

We need to do this for our own mental health, but also because the monkey mind has no room for God. In the monkey illustration, God is the tree. But as long as we bounce between branches, we never see the tree as a whole. Let us begin to tune out the urgent nothingness that our world thrusts at us from every screen, and replace it in our minds with *whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, . . . whatever is worthy of praise.*

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This device I carry around is not the enemy. It’s an amazing and useful tool. One small example: most of the early years of my ministry were the story of me trying desperately to remember to write everything down in my calendar and then not having my calendar with me. That’s better now. So I don’t intend to get rid of my smartphone. I just want it to be my tool, not the other way around. No one can serve two masters.