

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH
“Distractions”
I Samuel 3:1-10

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January 18, 2015

How do we know when God is calling us? In our story today Samuel thinks Eli is calling him, but it is actually God. The last time Samuel comes to Eli, after God has called him for the third time, it occurs to Eli that God is trying to get Samuel's attention. Eli tells Samuel to lie down, and if God calls him again to respond by saying, “Speak, Lord, for thy servant hears.”

There are a whole host of things which ask for our attention over the course of any given day. In Brian McLaren's latest book, “We Make The Road By Walking” he has a list of some of the “distractions” that keep us preoccupied with things other than God's call. Here's what he says:

“Today as in Jesus' day, not everyone seems interested in what Jesus taught. Some are more interested in revenge or isolation or gaining a competitive advantage over others. Some are obsessed with sex or a drug or another addiction. Many are desperate for fame or wealth. Still others can think of nothing more than relief from the pain that plagues them at the moment. But underneath even the ugliest of these desires, we can often discern a spark of something pure, something good, something holy – a primal desire for aliveness, which may well be a portal into the kingdom of God.” p.104

This tendency to get caught up in distractions is a central theme throughout the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. There is a well known story from the second book of Samuel about King David and his infatuation with a gal named Bathsheba. David is up one night walking on the roof of his house and he spots Bathsheba bathing. He has his soldiers go out and get her, and he lies with her, and she conceives a child. Unfortunately Bathsheba is married to Uriah the Hittite, and obviously this presents a problem. So, King David has Uriah sent to the front lines where he is killed. Problem solved or so he thinks. What the king doesn't count on is the displeasure of the Lord. And the Lord sends Nathan the prophet to confront the king, and his confrontation is clever and effective. As punishment for Davids wrong doing the poor child Bathsheba gives birth to is killed. David ends up feeling real bad about all this, but eventually lies with Bathsheba again, and she conceives and gives birth to Solomon.

To bring this into the context of McLaren's comments about distractions - “some are obsessed with sex.” It is King Davids obsession with wanting to have sex with Bathsheba which then leads to murder, mayhem and and the killing of an innocent child, by the Lord God none-the-less! Distractions can have serious consequences.

There are many other warnings and admonitions about distractions in the Old Testament including in the Psalms, Proverbs and one of my favorite examples comes from Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes is categorized as wisdom literature, and in it it says, “So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a striving after wind.” Eccl. 2:17 Here the Preacher, as the author is called, considers all of life a distraction! Fortunately, at the end of Ecclesiastes the author decides what life is about is respecting God and following the commandments. So in the end we are redirected back to faith and God.

The New Testament is also full of stories about people getting caught up with distractions. The prodigal son goes off to squander his inheritance on “loose living.” Jesus drives the money-changers and their patrons from the temple grounds. The scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day, make their “phylacteries broad and their fringes long.” Phylacteries are two small leather cubes which contain their morning prayers, one was strapped to the left arm, and the other to their foreheads. Fringes would be at the end of their robes. Jesus is saying that outwardly the scribes and Pharisees like to show how pious they are, but inwardly they are “full of dead mans bones.” Jesus goes to some length to expose the hypocrisy of these religious leaders. And, of course, I have to mention the rich young ruler who can't give his possessions to the poor, and therefore denies himself access to the kingdom of God. Jesus finally sums up by saying, “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God.” Lk. 18:24

The Bible's extensive treatment of people's tendency to get caught up with distractions suggests distractions may be a real problem for anyone interested in pursuing a spiritual life. Brian McLaren is saying there may be a desire within us even more primal than distractions. He says: “underneath even the ugliest of these desires, we can often discern a spark of something pure, something good, something holy – a primal desire for aliveness, which may well be a portal into the kingdom of God.”

I like this image of a portal into the kingdom of God, because it provides a focus, something we can work with. A portal is an opening which one can pass through in order to gain access to somewhere else. It's like a doorway. To me, the challenge to enter the kingdom of God is two-fold. First, we need to be able to discern the portal. What does it look like? For me it's meditation or quiet contemplation. For you it could be music or service to others or God's word or theological thinking or dancing or simply immersing yourself in the beauty of Creation. It could be quality time with a beloved friend, or a walk in the park with your dog. For Martin Luther King it was social justice. There are a lot of things which can serve as a portal for entrance to the kingdom, and I could list more, but you get the idea.

First we must discern the portal, but remember, the challenge to enter the kingdom is two-fold, and the second part is even more difficult. And that is to gain the willingness to pass through the portal. For me, the portal is meditation which Marianne Williamson once said, “has become the place I most want to be.” For me, it's not really a question of willingness anymore because it has become the place I most want to be. Now it's more so about finding the time and opportunity to meditate. Almost everyday I find that opportunity to pass through my portal into the kingdom. Which makes me a little different from most people, since most folks would most want to be with one or more of their distractions at any given point in a day. I'm not saying I don't have distractions. What I'm saying is I've been practicing passing through my portal long enough that it has become almost as necessary as breathing. Meditation is also desirable because I enjoy the resulting experience of spaciousness, peace and the connectedness it brings with others and the Creation.

The church entered the season of Epiphany on January 6th, and for us Disciples I believe Epiphany ends on the day before Ash Wednesday, which is the beginning of the season of Lent. So, since we are still in the season of Epiphany a story with the Magi in it is appropriate:

“As I celebrate Epiphany, I reflect on the Magi. These wise men from the east were on a mission to find the child who had been born king of the Jews. Thrown together by a common goal, they likely got to know each other pretty well along the way. When they saw that the star had stopped, and they had reached their destination, they were overcome with joy. I think the Magi enjoyed their entire journey.

Finding joy on the journey is primary. We boldly tackle a new recipe, hoping the outcome will bring enjoyment to those who eat the final product. We open a new book and savor the unfolding adventure. We assemble pieces of a new jigsaw puzzle, excited to see the final picture emerge. We enter into a new relationship and savor the process of getting to know another person. So as we walk with God, enjoy each moment. Enjoy the journey!”

– Ruthmarle Brooks Silver – Eagleville, Pennsylvania

What I’m suggesting with this devotion taken from “The Secret Place” is that the incentive for entering our portals to the kingdom can come from the enjoyment we experience when we do it. The joy of the Lord becomes our joy the more we spend time in God’s kingdom. This may all sound like escapism to you except the more time you spend in the kingdom, the more connected you become, and the more at oneness you feel with everything else. So it’s really not escapism at all, it has much more to do with “waking up.” I find I’m far more present to others after an hour of meditation. My mind is clearer, I’m more patient with people, and I feel rested. I don’t typically go to sleep during meditation, although if I’m tired when I go through the portal I can fall asleep, and I consider that my meditation. Sometimes following meditation I feel as if someone has lifted a thousand pounds off my back, and I can experience the “endless energy, boundless strength” the Apostle Paul talks about in the first chapter of Ephesians.

You may be saying to yourself, “Oh come on pastor, it’s not the same thing!” But I feel it is exactly the same thing. The Apostle was asleep in the world, asleep to his True-Self, and to the kingdom of God. He was going about killing Christians and generally acting like a crazy man. Then one day on the road to Damascus the Lord just knocked him upside the head, and three days later he woke up, and what he woke up to was his True-Self and the kingdom! After that everything was different, even his name changed from Saul to Paul.

For the rest of his life he’s talking about the joy of the Lord, and the importance of following Christ, and becoming like Christ, and living in Christ. I guess that’s what happens to someone who has radically made the transition from insanity to life in the kingdom. It leaves upon him such an impression, and it is such a freeing experience, it’s hard for him to talk about anything else! Though I imagine he had a beer or two at the local taverns on occasion. No one could stay revved up like him all the time.

Lets come back to the attraction of distractions, which would have been a great title for this sermon. The distractions McLaren listed in his book were: revenge, isolation and gaining a competitive advantage over others. He also listed fame, wealth, sex, drugs or other addictions. And finally the pain of the moment. Other than the pain of the moment, it seems to me people positively relish their distractions. People with alcohol or nicotine addictions spend a good amount of their precious time thinking about the next fix. The next drink or cigarette. People bent upon revenge become consumed entertaining ways to get even. Folks desiring wealth or fame often channel most of their thought and activity into reaching their goal. Then there are the less severe distractions like caffeine, television, sports addiction and the like. Why are we so preoccupied with these distractions which often keep us from passing through our portals to the kingdom? What is the attraction?

At least in part, I think it's because we spend an enormous amount of time asleep in the world, although we think we're awake. I take this from a book entitled, "The Great Transformation" by Karen Armstrong: "The unenlightened state was like the vision of a frog who lived in a well and could see only a little patch of sky that he mistook for the whole." p.355 Another way of putting it is being asleep in the world is like looking through a knothole in a fence, and believing what you see is the whole picture, when actually you're only seeing part of the picture, and a very small part at that. The Apostle would say: "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully..." 1 Cor. 13:12

Enlightenment starts as soon as you begin to know you don't know. As soon as you begin to realize that what you are aware of is only a fraction of what is actually going on. Distractions are a way of maintaining the illusion that we know what is going on, that we're seeing the whole picture. They help create a kind of security blanket.

Take a severe distraction like alcoholism. With alcoholism, not only are you the chief architect of your waking hours, as you scheme and plan and negotiate your next drunken spree. But you're also altering your own state of consciousness, how you feel and the way you see the world. In other words, you're completely in charge of creating your own reality. Talk about playing God! In a less damaging way, but still having essentially the same effect are the less severe addictions like being addicted to caffeine, television, sugar, pornography or any other repetitive activity which we kind of have a notion we shouldn't be doing so much. That notion is our conscience telling us we're not on the path that leads to our portals!

To give up our distractions is to give up control, and finally the illusion that we know what we're doing, and that we're seeing the whole picture. The AA group which meets on our grounds are people who are not only trying to stop drinking, they're also trying to give up their illusions of security, by turning their lives over to a higher power. They have heard the call because it has come from within them, and they're trying to respond to it. But it takes a tremendous amount of courage to give up your distractions.

It takes a lot of faith to give up our illusions of security and turn our lives over to Jesus Christ. We did it symbolically at our baptisms, and we Disciples do it symbolically every Sunday at the Lord's Table. But communion isn't going to mean much if we're not turning our lives over to Christ for real. What does your portal to the kingdom look like? And what does it take for you to get through it? Because when you go through it, you leave the distractions behind since you don't need them anymore. When you're resting in God you don't need to be in charge anymore, because all is well with your soul. When your soul is OK, everything is OK.