

Attention

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This was the big knock on Jesus in those days: he was hanging around with all the wrong people.

Sinners. Tax collectors. Prostitutes. The poor.

To so many around him it all seemed like a big joke. How could this man be who he says he is? How could he be God's presence on Earth if he is spending all this time with the lowly and outcast.

Surely God, in all God's glory and might, would come to their world, eat in the nice restaurants, among the finest company.

They were making fun of Jesus, it almost sounds like a middle school cafeteria, can you believe who he is sitting with? Definitely not the cool kids.

And as he so often did, Jesus responds to their barbs not with a direct retort, but with a story, a parable.

In this case, two parables.

A shepherd with a flock of one hundred sheep, who realized one day that he was down to 99, and went off searching until he found the one lost sheep and carried it back.

A woman who lost a precious coin, and swept her house until she uncovered it, then threw a party and invited the whole neighborhood.

And so it is with God. God is like that shepherd, or that woman, putting every ounce of effort into finding what is lost, seeking out what has gone astray, rescuing those in danger, lifting up what the world has lost underfoot.

So of course Jesus is eating with sinners. Of course he is spending time among the destitute and downtrodden.

That's what God does.

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Molli and I used to live in New York. And when we did we had a pretty hard and fast rule: we never went to Times Square.

There was nothing there for us really, and it was to our mind about the worst of what the city had to offer, an absolute crush of crowds. Too many people.

One time though, a visitor from out of town insisted. He had never been. He really wanted to see it.

So ultimately we relented, broke our rule, and set out on the Downtown 2 train to Times Sq. 42nd St.

Maybe some of you who have been to Times Square will relate, but all I can really picture from that moment was light and color.

Bright, flashing, moving, flickering, and fleeting images and words. All advertisements, suggestive and alluring, optimistic and unattainable.

I don't know if we were there for 10 minutes or an hour.

Walking down into the Subway felt like diving into cool water on a sweltering day. The chaos subsided. We rode back uptown toward our quieter corner of the city.

And then I realized something.

I never noticed the people.

Those crowds that had been my biggest hesitation in heading to that spot, I mean I felt them crushed in around me. But I couldn't picture a single person I had seen.

I could picture the M&M store, and the woman on the Gap billboard. I remembered some of the news stories that had been passing on the ticker. I remembered spotting the place where the ball drops on New Year's Eve.

But I didn't see any people. Not really.

My eyes never escaped the lights.

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But I've realized since then that it doesn't take Times Square to distract me. I've got a little mini-Times square in my pocket all the time. And I often catch myself lost in my phone instead of aware of what is going on around me.

But it doesn't even take a bright light. I've got my plan for the day, my next stop, my to do list... All of these things serve to narrow our focus, more and more, until, well, who knows what we are missing.

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I was listening to an interview recently with Journalist Ezra Klein, and he was asked to describe what he saw of as the role of the media in the world today. He said that in his mind the problem was not that people lacked information, we all have access to an extraordinary amount of information, all the time, arguably more than our brains can process.

He said that the role of the media then is “the orchestration of attention.” It is helping us determine what is deserving of our attention in any given moment. Filtering out the noise and helping us focus on what matters most.

I think he is really onto something with that idea. But, I don't want to leave it to profit-motivated media corporations to decide what is deserving of our attention.

I think faith is the orchestrator of our attention. God is the orchestrator of our attention.

That is what God is teaching the people around him with these stories. He is trying to train them, and train us, to pay attention to our world in a different way.

To focus less on the direction of the herd, and more on who is left behind.

To pry our eyes off the bright lights constantly vying for our attention. And get them back onto our fellow humans, and the real world around us.

Unless you bring some intention to it, the world will tell you what to pay attention to. Advertisements will convince you of what you need

to fit in. Media narratives will fit you into a box and put you onto one team or another.

The faith that Christ teaches is the discipline of paying attention in a different way. Of intentionally turning our attention to what is left out and left behind.

It is the discipline of looking around the board room and asking yourself who is *not* there who should be.

Of listening to a news report and wondering whose story is *not* being told.

Of peering into the halls of power and pressing the issue of whose interests are *not* being attended to.

Of examining our own ministry in this church and challenging ourselves to see who *we* are failing to serve.

Or simply of looking around the room that we are in and noticing who is left out.

Remembering that what God came to our world and walked in it as one of us, he was having a dinner party with all the people who had been locked out of the boardrooms.

He was listening intently to the lives of those whose stories had never been heard.

He was the one challenging the religious structures of his day to pay attention the world in a new way.

He was the one insisting that the powerful were failing in their most basic duty to care for the poor and the stranger.

And he was the one saying, look around, whatever you do to the least of these, you are doing to me.

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The biggest challenge is that the world around us is not neutral in all of this. It's not a blank slate. The culture and the spaces we move in have their own agendas for our attention. And they are typically not these.

Which means our faith needs to be a disciplined practice. We need to be together in worship to re-calibrate our hearts. We need to set aside time for prayer and quiet at the beginning and end of the day, to orient our attention toward God and God's hope for the world.

We cannot orchestrate our attention by sheer force of will, or just by thinking that we ought to. My encouragement to each of you is to find some practice that can serve as a spiritual drumbeat in your life.

Prayer together as a family at bedtime.

Five quiet breaths when you sit down at your desk at the beginning of the day.

A daily practice of reading from the Bible.

Decide now that you are going to be here next week, and the week after that too.

What would it feel like to have your attention grabbed by God as often as it is grabbed by Amazon, FaceBook, or Cable News?

It would be a different way of moving through the world to be sure.

But that's what Jesus was looking for, when he told us about this shepherd and his search for the lost sheep, this woman and her search for the lost coin.

Don't get so caught up in what everyone else tells you is important.

This is different. We are going to look at the world in a whole new way.

Pay attention. Pay attention.