

Homily – May I Have Your Attention

Rob Keim

February 17, 2021 – St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church

Today we celebrate Ash Wednesday and the beginning of the season of Lent. This is an Ash Wednesday unlike any we have ever had, but in some ways it is still the same. With ashes on our foreheads we leave our worship of God and go back out into the world. We remember the impermanence of everything, and we practice things that prepare us for the gift of eternal life that God has already given to each and every one of us. This is a gift we are called to now and not at some later time.

Now, here at St. Barnabas we like to use the season of Lent to focus on spiritual practices, practices that draw us closer to God, others, and self. We practice to get better. We practice baseball. We practice the piano. We practice medicine. If we want to do something well, then we have to practice, over and over and over. And, what is more important that our relationships with God, others, and self. Spirituality is important, so we must practice it. Throughout the centuries the saints have taught us better ways to follow Jesus. Let us use Lent to embrace those better ways.

Now, there are two different ways that we practice our spirituality. Some of you will remember that I have shared these lists with you before, and I want to share them with you again. First we practice our spirituality by engagement. Practices of engagement include: study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, and submission. You probably recognize most of not all of these and we could spend a week on each one of them. In fact, we spend our whole lives practicing engagement. These practices help us live lives that are immersed in the kingdom of God. These practices help us be in relationship with God.

There is a second category of practices that will help us in our movement towards God. Practices of abstinence include: solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, sacrifice and watching. This second category of practices is taught less frequently in our twenty-first churches, but they are practices that have proved to be successful throughout the ages. The practices of abstinence are designed to weaken or break the power of this world. Things of this world often separate us from God and get in the way of relationship with God.

We must include practices from both of these lists in our daily lives to progress in our relationship with God. In order to have spiritual growth we must practice. As we celebrate Ash Wednesday and enter the season of Lent we are reminded of our need to practice both engagement and abstinence. In a prior season of Lent, we focused on the spiritual practices of meditation, and we studied five different forms of meditation. In another season of Lent we focused on decluttering our lives. And last

year during Lent we focused on several spiritual practices of abnegation. Again, these practices are designed to help break the power that this world has on us. Things of this world often separate us from God and get in the way of relationship with God.

Now, there are many spiritual practices we can choose amongst, and here at St. Barnabas during this season of Lent we will focus in particular on the practices of watching or mindfulness, and more specifically, I want us to pay attention to where we pay attention. Again, we are going to practice paying attention to where we pay attention.

A few years ago, I had a class called take back your life. One piece of wisdom from this class taught to only touch an email once. Don't let the email sit in your inbox where you have to read and re-read it multiple times. Instead, read the email once and reply to it, forward it to someone else, file it, or delete it. Another piece of wisdom from the class was to turn off all of the alerts on your devices. Our ability to focus is precious, and every time an alert comes through about the latest piece of news or the latest new email, these alerts break our concentration. Studies have shown that it takes three to five minutes to regain focus that had been disrupted by an alert. So, if you want to stay focused then turn off all those alerts, because human beings are actually pretty lousy at multi-tasking.

One of the most finite resources in the world is human attention. All of the alerts and emails have caused the destruction of our ability to focus. Every single action we take — calling our parents, cleaning up the kitchen, or scrolling through our phones — all of these are attention transactions. We are taking what precious little attention we have and diverting it toward something. This is a zero-sum proposition. When you pay attention to one thing, you ignore something else. And, get this, in twenty-first century America, any discussion of power is now, ultimately, a conversation about attention and how we extract it, wield it, waste it, abuse it, sell it, lose it and profit from it. Those who can collectively commandeer enough attention can accumulate a staggering amount of power quickly. And it's never been easier to do than it is right now.

And, here is a truth about our ego and false self. It craves attention, and it gets angry when the attention is going somewhere else. We feel deprived and tortured when we aren't getting our fair share of attention. Even during these times in which we have been sheltered at home, many of us have the insatiable need use social media to share and share and share. Maybe you are like me, but sometimes all of this clamoring for my attention is overwhelming. There is just so much noise, noise, noise. We need spiritual practices that help us let go of our need for attention, and we need practices that will help us focus our finite attention on the things that really matter in life, namely our relationships with God, others, and self. So where do we start?

First, slow down and even hit the pause button. The easiest way to do this is to set aside twenty minutes in your day to meditate or sit in silence. If you find stillness to be unsettling then take a walk. Take the walk with no earbuds. Instead, listen to the birds and the wind through the branches of the trees. You might even pray.

Second, evaluate where you spend your time. It has been said that you can tell a person's priorities in life by looking at their checkbook. It is also true that a person's appointment calendar will show you what is important and unimportant. The iPhone even has a feature that tells you where you spend your screen time. Are you happy with the choices you see in your checkbook, appointment calendar, and screen time?

Third, turn off the devices. Can you do it? Turn them off.

Next, evaluate whether you are paying attention to God. God is present with us in each moment of our day. Bidden or unbidden God is with you. What are you doing to ignore God? What are you doing to push God away? What are you doing to notice the blessings that God has already given you? They are there if you pay attention to them.

Finally, ask yourself if you are paying attention to worthy role models. Are you paying attention to those that jump up and down the loudest making the most outrageous claims that pump up your own feelings of righteous indignation. Or, are you paying attention to those that help you increase your capacity for compassion and selfless love in a way that has been taught and modeled by Jesus.

Attention is a bit like the air we breathe. It's vital but largely invisible, and thus we don't think about it very much unless, of course, it becomes scarce. Pay attention to where you pay attention. It can force us toward a better understanding of how our minds work or how we value our time and the time of others. Perhaps, just by acknowledging our attention, we can begin to direct it toward people, ideas and causes that are worthy of our precious resource.

Spiritual practices come in many forms, but they all draw us into healthier relationships with God, others and self. Ash Wednesday reminds us of the impermanence of all things. We are all going to die, and because of Jesus we are all going to spend eternity with God. If you had one week left to live, are you paying attention to the things that are really important?