

Faith in the Midst of Distraction

Message for North East United Methodist Church

September 24, 2017

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A few years ago, while on a mission trip with Kids Alive in Pucallpa, Peru, I wrote in my journal, *“I am amazed at the missionaries’ faith and envious of their lives. They have nothing I have at home, but they have much peace...purpose...less distractions. I haven’t seen a television, not worried about the next item to purchase or vacation to plan. The missionaries are not fighting over trivialities but are focused on two things: Christ and the Mission. This drives them and gives them strength rather than stealing strength away, causing distraction. It is unlike the churches I have served in America where infighting, self-centeredness, and doctrinal differences distract us from our mission. So often we sit and fight as people drown. Here the focus is on rescuing the drowning from the dirt sea and ocean of poverty and hopelessness. There is nothing else.”*

If I were to describe the missionaries’ purpose...it would be with these words:



“...it was simply to love on kids, teach them about Jesus, feed and clothe and hold...to be the hands and feet of Christ...”

As I reflected on these words and my experience several summers ago, I was drawn to the word "distractions." In my experience there are many more distractions here, in our country, our culture, than in Peru. How often I become distracted from God, from my purpose, from the mission? Yet, in Peru there was little to distract us away from the reason we were there.

We live in a culture of distraction.



As Henry David Thoreau wrote, over a century ago, *“Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things.”*

David Ulin, in his book, The Lost Art of Reading – Why Books Matter in a Distracted Time, writes about how all his life, he had taken reading as for granted as eating – but then, a few years ago, he "became aware, in an apartment full of books, that I could no longer find within myself the quiet necessary to read". He would sit down to read at night, as he always had, and read a few paragraphs, then find his mind was wandering, imploring him to check his email, or Twitter, or Facebook. "What I'm struggling with," he writes, "is the encroachment of the buzz, the sense that there's something out there that merits my attention."

The distraction of what is "out there that merits our attention," not only pulls us away from being able to sit and focus on the book we are reading, but pulls our thoughts away from God, breaks apart our prayers, disrupts our mission, and punches holes in our ability to reach our goals.



Technology, media, magazines, gossip, sporting events, hobbies, work, the church, relationships, differences, consumerism, money...these can all be distractions, pulling us and pushing us away from the One who calls us closer.

Paul tells us in Philippians to "Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable." The Message translation puts it this way: "**...you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse.**" In other words, stay focused on the things of God... don't be distracted. Remember, we have an enemy, Satan, who wants nothing more than to distract us from the things of God.

Jesus was very clear that we cannot "serve two masters." He said, "for either [we] will hate the one and love the other, or else [we] will be loyal to the one and despise the other."

Often this scripture is only used in speaking about money, but the other "master" which is taking our attention away from God, which is splitting our devotion, could be anything...even our own family.

When we become "distracted" from the things of God...we become "distracted" and rather than immerse ourselves in prayer, in God's Word, in service and ministry, in building relationships and helping those who hurt...



We become "distracters"...focused on other "masters"...

Suddenly, we are the ones complaining, the ones gossiping, the ones focusing everyone on the cost rather than the possible opportunity for ministry, sharing our disgruntled opinions in the parking lot after meetings...suddenly we are the ones providing a poor example of faith to others as they see us "out and about" running errands on Sunday mornings or staying home to cook the Easter meal rather than attending worship...Suddenly, we are the ones causing others, many of whom do not know Christ, outside the church in the community, to become "distracted" from hearing God's voice...

We do not want to be "distracters"...The Bible tells us we are to be "*Christ's ambassadors*"...that God is "*making his appeal through us*"...we do not want to distract others from growing in their relationship, from opening their hearts up to God...



In **Mark 9:42**, Jesus said, "*Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.*"

And remember in God's eyes...we are all His "*little ones*"...

Therefore, we must fight "distractions"...we must fight against those things that would pull us away from God, that would infect our souls, our spirits, that would influence us in ways contrary to God's Word...that would lead us to be "distracters" ourselves...

Remember, scripture tells us, **I Corinthians 10:13 (The Message)** - "*No test or temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to remember*

is that God will never let you down; he'll never let you be pushed past your limit; he'll always be there to help you come through it."

We are not alone as we attempt to live our faith in the midst of distractions...knowing this we stay focused...**Proverbs 4:27 (The Message)** - *"Keep your eyes straight ahead; ignore all sideshow distractions. Watch your step, and the road will stretch out smooth before you. Look neither right nor left; leave evil in the dust."*

Hebrews 12:2 (NLT) - *"We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith."*

All through scripture, men and women take their eyes off of God, off of Christ, and are distracted away from God's purpose for their lives, from their mission...For Jonah, his prejudice was a distraction...for Pharaoh, his pride and quest for power was a distraction that blinded him to Israel's God... for the Israelites crossing the Jordan, it was the giants that held the land that made them forget the God who had parted the sea and brought them through the wilderness...for David, his lust for a woman...for Solomon it was his riches that distracted him...for the younger son, it was the world and its many enticements...for the rich young ruler, it was simply money... for Pilate it was the crowds yelling "*Crucify Him*" that distracted him from seeing the truth...for Martha it was all the house work and preparations that had to be made...for Peter it was when he took his eyes off of Jesus and placed them on the waves around him, allowing the waves to distract him from the One who was calling Him forth...it was only then Peter began to sink...

How often I get distracted? As a pastor and also a man with children, a wife, family, and friends, I often find myself like Martha, running around, trying to cross things off my "to-do list" and miss the opportunity to sit at Jesus feet...

This message today hits very close to home. I have been distracted for many months now and I have grown tired. Going back to when I first was pulled aside by my District Superintendent at a Conference meeting and told they were reappointing me to North East UMC, to putting our home on the market, to packing, moving, trying to adjust to a new congregation...to dealing emotionally with the fact that my oldest son will be graduating college and getting married, my youngest son will be graduating high school and starting college...dealing emotionally with the fact that our family is changing...my boys are no longer little...I'm getting older...

My world, my personal world, has been one distraction after another...pulling me away from a deep and intimate relationship with my Creator as I focus on the immense changes going on around me...as I worry about the future...as I struggle with finances and student loans...as I learn a new congregation and the many opportunities and challenges it holds...

I have been Martha...running around with all the house work and preparations...I have been Peter...sinking beneath the waves of change and stress...I have been an Israelite...afraid to cross the river for fear of the real and imaginary giants I will most likely face...These last several months I have been all of these...I have allowed life's situations to become a distraction instead

of an opportunity to crawl up in my Heavenly Father's lap and share my hurts and worries and fears with Him.

Why did I envy the missionaries that summer?



...because many of the distractions seemed to be less powerful along the dirt sea of San Jose, outside Pucallpa, Peru...while in Pucallpa, the mission...the need...the hurts...are so evident...so prominent...it is hard to focus on anything outside Christ's mission to make disciples and love your neighbor...



...it is hard to give trivialities any importance when a child down the street is being abused, or a family is starving, or children are sleeping on dirt floors...



Here it is easy to overlook the reality around us as we simply surround ourselves with people just like us, escape to our stained-glass sanctuaries, our air-conditioned homes, the stories told on our televisions, or our favorite vacation spots. Here, many times, the distractions that surround us,

keep us not only from growing closer to the God who loves us, but also from seeing the hurt and need around us.

Even the church can be a distraction...keeping us from God...keeping us so busy...nailed down in meetings and programs and fundraisers and traditions that we are unable to get to know the One who was nailed down to a cross for us...No where have I read a better example than this than in Kyle Idleman's book, [Not a Fan](#). He writes, *"A few months ago I was speaking in Houston, Texas, and a good-sized man, with a good-sized belt buckle, came up to me with tears in his eyes. He began to tell me the story of his prodigal daughter, how she went to college and totally turned her back on the faith. As soon as he started the story I knew how it would go. I've heard it so many times, even the details seem predictable. But when he finished, he didn't ask me why she was doing this or what had gone wrong. He wasn't looking for an explanation. Instead, with one sentence he put his finger on what he thought happened. Here's what he said..."*

We raised her in Church, but we didn't raise her in Christ.

We cannot serve "two masters"...There is only one mission, one purpose...to love Jesus...to live what we profess...to make disciples...to love our neighbor...Our relationship with Christ is more important than any other aspect of our lives...it should define us...carry us...challenge us...Nothing...not even those people or things closest to us should distract us from that relationship...from living out what we profess, what God commands...

How do we do battle? How do we live our faith in a world of distraction?

We fight against the distractions...we don't give in to the culture that surrounds us...to the negativity that encircles us...to the world's morals that fly against the scripture we follow...we *"fix our eyes"* on the things of God...

In the classic novel, [In His Steps](#), by Charles Sheldon, written in 1896, the story is told of Rev. Henry Maxwell. Rev. Maxwell encounters a homeless man who challenges him to take seriously the imitation of Christ. As Paul writes in **Ephesians 5:2 (The Message)** - *"Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that."*



The homeless man has difficulty understanding why, in his view, so many Christians ignore the poor. He tells Rev. Maxwell, *"I heard some people singing at a church prayer meeting the other*

*night, All for Jesus, all for Jesus, All my being's ransomed powers, All my thoughts, and all my doings, All my days, and all my hours.' and I kept wondering as I sat on the steps outside just what they meant by it. **It seems to me there's an awful lot of trouble in the world that somehow wouldn't exist if all the people who sing such songs went and lived them out. I suppose I don't understand. But what would Jesus do? Is that what you mean by following His steps?"***

This leads to many of the novel's characters asking, "**What would Jesus do?**" Simply asking that question before any decision, any conversation, any task...changes and transforms, not only their lives, but the life of the community. I believe these are words that still help us stand against the distractions of the day that would pull us away from our mission, our faith, our God...that help us make the right decisions...

My wife has taught me to ask a different question to keep on the narrow road, not allowing the distractions to push and pull on me, driving me off course...She asks, "**Is it of eternal consequence?**" When something is not going my way? When I have a bad day at work? When a meeting goes south quick? When I don't have the money to purchase the item I so desperately want to own? When the car breaks down and we don't have the money to fix it? When people rant and rave over miniscule issues? When I come home upset, despondent, confused...she simple asks, "Is it of eternal consequence? Is it of eternal importance?" Obviously the answer is "no" and many times recognizing this, it gives me the strength to stand back up, recommit to the mission, to what's important...focusing once more on the One whom I serve rather than the world that surrounds me...

This is another reason small groups are so vital...we need other Christian men and women to walk with us on this journey...to help us stay focused on what is of eternal consequence...to not be so easily distracted...

It is difficult...so hard to stay focused. What we are discussing today is an everyday battle that we must take on...we must not surrender. Even as I was writing this sermon, I was easily distracted...worrying about money, my children, the church, my to-do-list, the future...trying to come up with solutions to problems, both present and non-existing, rather than trusting and laying it before God...Once more I needed to remind myself to take my wife's advice and ask, "Is it of eternal consequence?"

Matthew 6:33-34 (NKJV) - *"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow..."*

When we were on the mission trip this summer in Pucallpa, Peru, I wrote in my journal, *"I am amazed at the missionaries' faith and envious of their lives. They have nothing I have at home, but they have much peace...purpose...less distractions. I haven't seen a television, not worried about the next item to purchase or vacation to plan. The missionaries are not fighting over trivialities but are focused on two things: Christ and the Mission. This drives them and gives them strength rather than stealing strength away, causing distraction. It is unlike the churches I have served in America where infighting, self-centeredness, and doctrinal differences distract us from our mission. **So often we sit and fight as people drown. Here the***

focus is on rescuing the drowning from the dirt sea and ocean of poverty and hopelessness. There is nothing else.”



May our focus be on rescuing the drowning...following Christ...seeking first the kingdom of God...and nothing else! May nothing distract us!