

PAYING ATTENTION

Psalm 27:1-4,13-14; Matthew 13:44-50

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham

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(This sermon draws much of its substance from an excellent paper by Kathy Anderson, presented to the January 2013 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Louisville, Kentucky. Many of my sermons draw from the work of others, but this sermon, as noted in the footnotes, borrows more than a little from her paper.)

My friend Kathy is a pastor in Texas. A few years ago, she set before our preaching group a dilemma that we all face in our day. She said,

From before dawn until after dusk, the amount of words and information that comes across the screens, and into the spaces, of our lives is staggering. The various television networks broadcast multiple images: the main frame where people (usually several of them) are talking, plus both a vertical and horizontal ticker – sometimes more than one because both the stock market status and breaking news require equal time, twenty-four hours a day. And that involves just the television. Beyond that, our smart phones, iPads, [Instagram], Facebook ... Twitter, Pinterest, podcasts ... demand a portion of our time each day. We live in a world where it is difficult to pay attention, because we already see and hear so, so much that we are required to take in and process.¹

So, the question of the day is: In a world so filled with distractions, how can we pay attention to the things that really matter?

Mindfulness, paying attention, is an act of faithfulness in our time. To pay attention is to notice. To pay attention is to be present. It is to weigh matters of ultimate consequence. You'd think that with all the data out there in our news-saturated world, such a practice would be easy, but it's not. So how, exactly, are we to pay attention? And to *what* are we to lend our consideration? Well, we need first to look broadly. We look to the world around us in both its ugliness and its beauty. We need to notice and name the constant contest between evil and good, between hatred and forgiveness, between violence and peacemaking, between brokenness and healing. We need to be aware and be wary of the rise of hate speech and unspeakable violence and the voices that encourage them ... *yet also* to notice the power of God's love and grace and of those who work to counter the hate speech with calmer voices of reason. And in looking for God's love and grace, we don't have to look off in the distance; we can start with those around us.

In a sermon some years ago, Episcopal priest William Dols remembered a well-known trial from nearly a century ago, one still being argued today.

¹Kathy Anderson, unpublished paper presented to the January 2013 meeting of the Moveable Feast, Louisville, Kentucky.

Williams Jennings Bryan, congressman from Illinois and three-time nominee for the presidency, spent the last years of his life as activist in the religious movement known as fundamentalism. In 1925, at Dayton, Tennessee, William Jennings Bryan was an associate prosecutor in the trial of the school teacher John Thomas Scopes. Scopes had taught the biological theory of evolution to his students in defiance of a state law prohibiting the teaching of any doctrine contrary to the Bible. The defense attorney was Clarence Darrow. Bryan won what became known as “The Monkey Trial,” and Scopes was fined \$100. But Darrow’s merciless cross-examination humiliated Bryan and dealt a fierce blow to fundamentalism. Some say the trial broke the heart of William Jennings Bryan. Several days after the trial ended, Bryan died.

In the play *Inherit the Wind* – a dramatic retelling of the Scopes trial – the character representing *Baltimore Sun* reporter H.L. Mencken, upon hearing of Bryan’s death, says to Clarence Darrow, “Why should we weep for him? You know what he was – a Barnum-bunkum Bible-beating blowhard.” [But Darrow responds to the] agnostic Mencken... “A giant once lived in that body. But the man got lost - lost because he was looking for God too high up and too far away.”

Which may be how many of us get lost [Dols says] - looking for God too high up and too far away. We forget or never knew or were threatened and terrorized and [so] denied along the years the possibility that God’s kingdom ... is to be found within and among us – close in, as near as heart beat and breath and hands touching. In the Gospel of Thomas, a collection of Jesus’ sayings from the first century, Jesus says, “The kingdom of God is spread out upon the earth, but you do not see it.”²

And that, I think, may be what Jesus wanted his disciples to understand when he spoke to them of the kingdom of heaven. It’s not out there somewhere in inter-stellar space. It is here among us in every moment of grace, in every act of kindness, in every rage against injustice. It’s like a treasure hidden in a field, like the pearls that became the merchant’s quest. The point is that when people truly encounter something precious, something of inestimable value, nothing else compares. The kingdom of heaven is like this, Jesus says. “When people truly encounter it and realize what it is, it enters their hearts, seizes their imaginations, and overwhelms them with its precious value.”³ You may stumble upon it, or it may be the end of a faithful, persistent quest. Tom Long says,

So it is with the kingdom of heaven. Some people are on a quest. They are hungry for meaning, and when the kingdom is found, they recognize its priceless gleam immediately. They have been reading widely or studying hard or asking countless questions, and then, they discover the depths of the gospel. Perhaps they were raised in the church but never found it satisfying; so, they went in pursuit of something more profound, only to discover that the priceless pearl was at home all along.

² William L. Dols, “Looking for the Kingdom of God Too High Up and Too Far Away,” *Day 1* sermon, July 28, 2002. http://day1.org/559-looking_for_the_kingdom_of_god_too_high_up_and_too_far_away, accessed July 30, 2013.

³ Thomas G. Long, *Westminster Bible Companion: Matthew*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 197, 156.

But others are not on a quest at all. They have enough to handle simply coping with life. They are plowing or filing or cooking...or raising children or going to meetings. They expect nothing but the routine, anticipate no more today than a variation on [yesterday's bad news]. But then, something wonderful and surprising happens. Maybe a baby is born, and the preciousness of human life as a gift from God breaks into the routine. Or maybe a line from a book or a stray remark from somebody at work breaks through the [cynicism] and shines an unexpectedly gracious light on everything. Or maybe a phrase from an old hymn drifts across the memory like the scent of costly perfume. All at once, life becomes holy, God seems near, and everything pales before this new and ... priceless truth.⁴

But it does so only if we are paying attention. It does so only if we are mindful enough to notice, and our lives are so often distracted, and too often we don't notice. Beauty and grace are performed all around us all the time, whether we notice or not. The practice of paying attention puts us in a position to take note of such gifts. I'll let Kathy Anderson lead us toward a conclusion today; she says,

Jesus probably never heard the word "mindfulness," but that's how he lived. He paid attention. He noticed the world around him. "Consider," he would say. "Consider the lilies. Consider the poor widow, how she gives. Consider this little child." God, in Jesus Christ, pays attention to the world. And [we are called to be attentive, too].

Perhaps what Jesus is talking about is something much larger, much more mysterious and less, oh, *defined* than we want to hear. It's almost as if he's saying, "Pssst...there's more to see, but you're going to have to pay attention. Look. And listen. This kingdom of heaven, the reign of God, the divine presence and the activity of the holy in the world, is like this...it's like this...and this...and this." With each turn of the prism, it's as if Jesus is saying, "Now *see*, *that's* what I'm [talking about]."

God so rarely chooses the obvious or the grand to be the bearer of the good news, to give us a glimpse into the divine ... or hope for the world. Seeds, yeast, treasures, nets, and pearls make up a few of the colors of the divine palette – for the most part, tiny, small and obscure things in life that aren't worth much by the world's standards.

It's like that little bit of yeast, folded and kneaded in, bubbling away in the warmth and darkness of flour, water and a little bit of sugar – leaven – causing the dough to rise. It's hidden deep within, and has to be left alone for a while, working in its own time, not to be rushed or managed by human hands. The presence of God at work in the world likens itself both to something we just come upon, like the treasure someone found in field and to something we seek after, looking and looking until we've found it, asking questions, turning over each rock, looking behind each door. It's like that wide net that scrapes the bottom of life and gathers all of us in.

⁴ Long, 157.

So we turn the prism again and again. The kingdom of heaven, the reign of God, was, is, and ever shall be seen in those small things, those obscure things, hidden and silent, working by unexpected means, turning things on their head, messing things up, demanding that we have eyes to see it when it happens...in a moment. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by. Jesus never tells us what the reign of God IS, just what it is like. Completely revealed to us, yet completely hidden....

A while back, [Kathy says,] I took part of the day to visit the place where my grandparents are buried. Theirs is a small country cemetery across the road from the church their forebears helped found. It's quite plain, actually – given that most of the folks buried there come from good German Lutheran stock. They're surrounded for eternity by the land that gave them life for so many years: corn, cotton, cattle, black dirt, and sky.

As I walked down the gravel paths [that day], reading the stones... a little mother killdeer met me, colors flashing, fussing at me all the way. She didn't fly away but persisted in letting me know the best way she knew how that under no uncertain terms was I to tread another step in her direction. And so, I stopped in my tracks, and looked. And there they were. Four small eggs, in a nest of dirt and rocks, camouflaged nicely, blending right in to the surroundings. If she hadn't sounded the alarms, I either would have stepped on them, or walked right on by.

Perhaps, just perhaps, God's activity in the world and presence among us is like that...like a mother bird who makes her nest amid the graves, that all the while the saints rest from their labors, she's busy with hers, witnessing to the truth that life [and grace do] indeed defeat death [and hate and ugliness], and that the grave does not have the last word. [Perhaps, there is goodness close at hand. Perhaps there is.] Perhaps, just perhaps, when we are paying attention, the kingdom of heaven, the reign of God, is like that...⁵

⁵ Anderson paper.