

“Would You Please, for the Love of God, Pay Attention!”

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People collect all kinds of things. Teacups. Seashells. Stamps. Baseball cards... But I'm a writer, so I collect words. Yeah, I know, nerd, right? I actually keep a notepad where I jot down particularly interesting words and their meanings. Actually, these days, I do a lot of *re-collecting*. Some of the words I used to know were misplaced after a minor stroke I had a couple years ago. Recommitting those lost words to memory – *again* - is just plain annoying. But, when I'm reading a book, or an article and a word pops up that's truly new to me, I get really excited. I look up the definition and if it's thought-provoking and not too obscure, it goes in my notepad.

A few weeks ago, I stumbled on the word tropism. T-R-O-P-I-S-M. Many of you probably know what it means. And maybe I too learned about tropism once upon a time a gazillion years ago in biology class. But I was probably staring out the window at a robin when Mr. Hurley taught us about it. Kind of ironic, since tropism means, “the turning of all or part of an organism in a particular direction in response to an external stimulus.” For example, me turning to look out the window when a bird flitted by. Or, in the truly biological sense, a plant bending toward the sun light. This got me thinking about how often, and how easily our attention can be pulled in another direction. Okay, so by now you are probably all wondering, what the heck does all this linguistics and science crap have to do with our scripture lesson today from David and Luke. Quite a lot, I think.

The psalmist, David, tells us to, “Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him” ...and later in the passage, “Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him.” Whoa! We have to *commit*?! And *be still*?! Kind of reminds me of when I was a kid and my mother would try to get me to stop watching the Partridge Family long enough to hear what chores she wanted me to do before going to bed. I can still hear the exasperation in her voice, “Would you please, for the love of God, pay attention!” Eh...what can I say. David Cassidy was a pretty strong biological pull for a pre-teen girl. But I digress. Getting back to our scripture lessons for today, what is it exactly that God wants us to commit to, and why does it require we be still? Let's ask Luke. He wrote down some pretty important words that Christ had to say on the subject...

“To you who are listening I say: Love your enemies,” and later in the passage, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you...Love your neighbors, do good to them...Judge not lest ye be judged.” You can almost hear God saying, “Hey, are you paying *any* attention to me?” This is God we're talking about, after all. You'd think we'd listen. But hey, life isn't a biology class with a robin flying by the window. Or a cute guy singing on TV. There's some extremely distracting stuff going on out there in the world we live in. It's a little hard to ignore when the planet is melting before your eyes and Russia is cannibalizing its neighbors, teetering us toward another world war. Not to mention some of the downright disturbing stuff happening right here

in our own corner of the world. Hell, yeah, it's easy to get distracted, to lose attention when God is speaking to us. Well, guess what? There's an app for that! Prayer.

The extraordinary French philosopher, Simone Weil, wrote extensively about both prayer and attention. In her book, *Gravity and Grace*, Weil says that Gravity signifies the forces of the natural world — social, physical, psychological, political — all of them functioning as a downward “pull” on our attention, away from God and the afflicted. Away from doing good, in spite of evil. Weil certainly experienced those pulls herself. Living as a young Christian convert during World War II, Weil literally put her philosophy and religious convictions to work. The frail young woman worked with the French resistance and labored in the fields. Although she was already sick and weak, Weil took only minimal rations in solidarity with her countrymen living in the occupied territory. Her fervor led to her death from tuberculosis far too young at age 34. But not before writing down some profound ideas about the need for attention, to God, and to one another.

Weil points to the parable of the Good Samaritan, where compassion is exchanged when one individual “turns his attention toward” another anonymous, afflicted individual. Someone seen as an enemy. Weil tells us, “Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love. Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.” She says, “The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say, “What are you going through?”

She goes on to say, when we pay attention to God and each other, we experience Gravity's counter-balance — Grace. Weil describes how Grace — the goodness of God through the crucifixion — pierces the world, serving to orient, harmonize, and balance. But for Gravity to be defeated and Grace to prevail, Weil says, and — more importantly — scripture tells us, that we must pay attention to God's will, not our own. As scary as it is, she says, love must be vulnerable and defenseless in the face of evil.

Yikes! You might be thinking, what happens if I reach out to love my enemy — or, hell, sometimes even an estranged family member — and instead of hearing choirs of angels rejoicing in the heavens, you know, that harmony Weil talked about? What if instead you hear a cacophony of anger? I was trying to answer that question for myself and mentioned my conundrum to my husband Alan. I said to him, “This loving your enemy stuff doesn't always go the way you hope it will, you know?” Alan said it reminded him of the time we worked together on an avant-garde off-Broadway play in New York many years ago.

I was the alto soloist for the incidental music score that Alan composed for the play. The score included having the cast also serve as a kind of a capella Greek Chorus at various points during the play. Being that it was an avant-garde play, and Alan being Alan, there were no words to these “songs”. Alan told the nervous actors, who were not trained singers, just to find their three best notes and when he cued them, to all start singing together using their own random notes with open vowel sounds. Letting the notes land where they may, so to speak.

My job was to listen to them and then join with them singing my own wordless, melisma — But I had more notes. Alan cued me with a single note as my starting point, and then I launched into a full-scale vocalize. The idea was for me to create a vocal run of random notes that in the end, hopefully, would unify all those random notes into something that made sense, ending in a dramatic climax. If I paid close enough attention to what they were singing, and they, in turn, listened to me, it worked. The result was never the same. Best case, we turned dissonance into something akin to harmony and maybe even be downright moving. Worst case, it sounded like an absolute mess. On those nights when I was distracted, or when the notes being sung by the chorus weren't particularly inspiring — or they didn't like my notes either, or they weren't paying attention to me — I gotta to tell you, I was glad to be singing from the wings behind a curtain. But on those nights when the chorus and I were really paying attention to one another? When the sound swirled throughout the theatre? All around us and the audience? Well, it felt almost mystical. It felt like prayer.

So, give God your attention. Your *full* attention. Listen to Him. Love your enemies. Don't be afraid of the dissonance. Embrace it.