

A Sacred Direction

A Sermon on Jeremiah 29, 2 Timothy 2, and Luke 17 by the Rev. Philip Major
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One of most powerful gifts of your life is the gift of your attention. If you want to show someone you care, give them your attention. If you want the curve of your life to bend towards God's way of doing things, give your attention to God's way of doing things. If you want your life to be filled with goodness, give your attention to things that are good. Give your attention to doing some good works, give your attention to words that bring strength and courage, give your attention to the goodness of God's creation, give your attention to activities that bring beauty and hope to your life.

Jesus calls us to be intentional about the choices we make. As disciples of Jesus, being faithful means making good decisions about the way we are directing our attention to people, activities, words and ideas. Today's scripture readings provide us with three variations on this theme.

In our passage from Jeremiah, the prophet is addressing the leaders of Israel who have been taken away to live in exile in Babylon. In the last several weeks we've heard little pieces of Jeremiah's story. A few weeks ago, we read part of the story where Jeremiah was being held prisoner by the King of Judah. While Jeremiah was in prison, the armies of Babylon were conquering the towns and cities of Judah. Eventually the Babylonians laid siege to the city of Jerusalem. After many of the people in the city had died of starvation, they broke through the walls of the city and destroyed the Temple built by King Solomon. I'll spare you the gory details, but in the end, the leaders of Judah were taken captive and brought to Babylon, which was an ancient kingdom in the land that is now Iraq. The leaders of the Babylonian army must have decided that anyone who was an enemy of the King of Judah would not be any threat to them, because they did not take Jeremiah prisoner.

So Jeremiah was writing from Jerusalem when he sent this message to the captives: *Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*

The exiles are in a terrible situation. Their homes and places of work have been destroyed or taken away from them. They've been led away in chains. They are not free to return to their native land. They are separated from their families and friends. They are surrounded by people who speak a different language.

And yet God has given them a powerful gift: the gift of their attention. It's not going to help for them to weep in despair and refuse to engage in the normal activities of life. For the exiles in Babylon, the way to be faithful was to give their attention to the good, creative activities of life. The same thing is true for us in our times of distress. We have the power to give our attention to the good, creative activities of life, even in our times of trial.

This is the message of Jeremiah and the message of our passage from 2 Timothy. The author of 2 Timothy uses some of the same themes found in Paul's letters, such as in this verse in the middle of our passage: *If we have died with him, we will also live with him.* But we have many clues that 1 and 2 Timothy were written about 40 years after Paul died. The timing is important because this time, about 70 years after the first Easter was a difficult time for many of the first congregations of Christians. It was a difficult time because they were no longer connected to the Jewish synagogues. The Jews were not treated well by the Roman Emperors, but they were a recognized minority group within the empire. This meant the Jews had some official status within the Roman Empire. And outside of the Jewish community, a large group of people in the Roman Empire respected and even studied the Hebrew Scriptures. The Jews called them 'The God Fearers'.

But the Christians didn't have any official status. They were not a recognized minority. They did not have a large group of outsiders reading their scriptures and watching their religious rituals with respect. A few generations after 1 and 2 Timothy were written, the descendants of these Christian congregations were persecuted by the Romans.

The congregations that were the first audiences for these letters were not feeling confident and adventurous. They were afraid. They were feeling insecure and confused about their future. Some of them were probably asking, "Given the changes we have experienced, what does it even mean to be a Christian?"

So this letter emphasizes the importance of enduring through times of suffering. *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead... that is my gospel, for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect.* Near the end of the passage, we hear this warning: *warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening.*

The words we choose are important because they express our values and assumptions. But sometimes people scrutinize other people's choice of words in ways that are destructive for us and for our relationships. Sometimes we see ourselves wrangling over words in ways that divide us from others or take our attention away from building trust with others. When words become something that divides us, we can mend these relationships by asking, "What are my intentions? What are your intentions?"

As disciples of Jesus, being faithful means making good choices about the way we are directing our attention to people, activities, words and ideas. It also means not spending all of our energy scrutinizing our choice of words or someone else's choice of words. There are other things that deserve our attention.

There is a garden that needs to be weeded or planted. There are homes to build. There are people who need our care. There are people to feed. There are songs to be sung. And there are things to be thankful for. One of our sacred tasks is to give thanks for what has been given to us.

This is the message of our Gospel passage. The story of Jesus healing the ten lepers is found only in the Gospel of Luke. This is yet another story about paying attention.

Jesus is on his final journey, headed back to Jerusalem, and travels through the region on the border of Samaria. As he is walking, a group of ten men with leprosy approaches him. They are clearly paying attention because they recognize Jesus from afar. The men not only recognize who Jesus is, they recognize the power and gift of healing he brings to the world. Since they have leprosy, they are supposed to call out, "Stay away! We are lepers!" Instead, they call out, "*Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!*"

The ten men are paying attention, and they see the most important part of Jesus; Jesus brings the good news of God's mercy and forgiveness to the world. Then Jesus saw them. Jesus pays attention to them. He said, "*Go and show yourselves to the priests.*" *And as they went, the ten men were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.*

For Jesus, and for Luke, and for us, this is the unexpected turn in the story. All of the men with leprosy were paying attention, but only one of them paid enough attention to understand it was time to give thanks to God. The man who turned back to Jesus to give thanks was a foreigner. He was the most despised kind of foreigner for the people around Jesus. He was considered to be a mixed-race person, a Samaritan. And the mixed-race foreigner is the sacred example of paying attention.

We are trying to follow his example by paying attention to the gifts God is giving us, and by giving thanks. The story of the ten men with leprosy helps us see there is a direct relationship between our willingness to say 'Thank you' and us discovering that we have been saved by God's grace. The goal for us is to see at least a few of the gifts God is giving us. This is one of those activities we never do perfectly. But when spend more time paying attention to the gifts God is giving us, we see more of

the gifts God has given us. For us as Christians, one of the main goals in life is to see more of the gifts God is giving us, and for our life to become a life of thanksgiving.

There are many things in life we do not get to choose, but God has given you a sacred choice. God has given you the gift of being able to direct your attention in a sacred direction. We get to choose whether we will give our attention to words, and activities, and people that bring us closer to God. We get to choose whether we will turn to God and to the people around us and say, "Thank you!"