**“The Cricket or the Coin”**

**By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City MD, Nov 10, 2019**

One of my childhood homes was situated across the street from a graveyard dating back centuries. Many of the headstones were too weather worn to see their message. Others were newer and the words were still etched deep in the stone. On these headstoes with the words still clearly visible, my sister and I would take a sheet of paper and crayons and make rubbings of those words – those words chosen so meticulously by the family mourning their beloved – words that could summarize their lives in a simple phrase. Turning headstones into the artwork of children. Rev. Victoria Safford’s reflection reminded me of these early days, when the attention of my sister and myself was focused on our time together and our intention to make art from our surroundings. Rev Safford also focused her attention on headstones, and took note of one particular epitaph she saw, the words reading: “She attended well and faithfully to a few worthy things.” Not “unimportant, meaningless details,” but “a few worthy things” – a lifestyle choice so important that it was the phrase her family chose to behold her memory forever. Rev. Safford asks, “how do you want your obituary to read?”

When we take a retrospective look at our lives, we can note where our values and priorities lay. I can clearly note what my priorities were – where my attention lay – throughout my life until this point. With that retrospective lens, it is easier to notice if we spent more time at work or with family – if we emphasized cleaning or nature walks. What do we want our legacy to be? We only have a brief amount of time on this sacred planet – how do we want to spend it? Where should our attention lie? “She attended faithfully to a few worthy things.” Rev. Safford calls for us to be intentional in choosing children instead of dishes, of choosing love instead of money, and to listen to the steady call of our hearts. Think of the difference in the quality of life in the dichotomies depicted. When we pause and take a blunt and honest look at our lives, are we living our values? Are we focusing our attention on the superficial and transient or the deep and introspective? So often we are presented with a choice – an untidy house or an unread novel. A looming deadline or a family dinner. What we choose to focus our attention on will impact our well-being and our lives. I am glad that, as a child, I spent time with my sister creating art, paying attention to both the love of my sister and the beautiful power of artwork. “She attended well and faithfully to a few worthy things.”

Throughout every day there are a wealth of options for where our senses can rest – what our ears listen to or our eyes see – a wealth of options for our precious attention to lie.

When we move down a city street there may be noises or sights that are hard to miss. The honk of a city bus, the screech of tires as a car suddenly comes to a dramatic halt, neon lights flashing advertisements. Simple and loud distractions. But there are other distractions that we can only experience if we are truly paying attention- the chirp of an insect, or the gentle click of fallen change hitting a sidewalk. If we are attentive to nature – we will notice nature wherever we go – even noticing the simple the shade of grey or blue of the sky. Similarly, if our focus is money, we will be more attentive to distractions related to money. Do you hear the cricket, or the coin? Are we being attentive to nature and that sacred beauty that surrounds us, hearing sounds of critters even in the strangest of places, or are we being attentive to money and wealth?

If we make a habit of focusing on nature and mindfulness, we may notice the clouds when others don’t. If we focus on humanitarian issues, we may notice and smile at an unhoused person on the street instead of moving past without notice. If we are focused on money, we may hear that fallen coin – we may pay more attention to advertisements or the clothing or property of others around us. What we hear or see or experience is dependent on what we listen for or look for or seek out. Two different people walking down the very same street can have two different experiences. What do you hear, the cricket, or the coin?

Poet Mary Oliver reflects, in her poem that has been adapted for brevity,

“What did you notice?

The dew snail;  
the low-flying sparrow;  
the bat, on the wind, in the dark…

What did you hear?

The thrush greeting the morning;  
the little bluebirds in their hot box;…

**What was most wonderful?**

The green breast of the hummingbird;  
the eye of the pond;  
the wet face of the lily;

I wonder how each one of us could respond to these simple questions. What did you notice? What did you hear? What was most wonderful? Did you notice the dew snail, or the rise and fall of the stock market? Did you hear the thrush greeting the morning, or the refrain of your daily anxieties replaying in your head? What was most wonderful, the green breast of the hummingbird, or a meticulously cleaned kitchen?

I hope we can take time to shift our attention, to focus on a few worthy things, to hear the cricket instead of the coin, to note the call of a bird instead of a deadline. Let the refrain of these questions serve as a reminder.

As we explore these choices we make – these choices about values and attention and meaning – we need note our current culture of picture taking and video making and social media.

Do we value the present moment? Is this shifting? Can we take a pause from cameras and videos and social media and all that technology that has become inherent in our culture and our society? Can we separate from this a bit and pay attention to now; pay attention to being. What was most wonderful, the moment or the pictures of it?

Wendell Berry wrote,

“He showed

his vacation to his camera, which pictured it,

preserving it forever: the river, the trees,

the sky, the light, the bow of his rushing boat…

With a flick

of a switch, there it would be. But he

would not be in it. He would never be in it.”

There are so many times when I will see folks sitting together at a table, not talking or interacting with each other or with the present moment, but with their phones or their tablets. Coffee cooling alongside a best friend and a slice of pie as the person focuses instead on updating their social media account or choosing just the right picture – not living in the present moment or enjoying the coffee or the pie or the friendships, instead pulled into their gadget. Like the character in this poem – physically on vacation; present in body, but absent in mind. Not participating but capturing – not experiencing but documenting. It’s a trap of sorts, wanting to save the moment forever and share it, in exchange missing the moment yourself. Allowing pictures to trump experience. To travel to distant lands or even just a local park and instead of facing a magnificent structure or the beauty of a tree, facing away with phone in hand to take just the right picture! We miss moments of connection and moments of beauty and moments of interaction.

We can choose what we pay attention to.

And so we miss moments with our friends or our family and we pay attention to deadlines and anxieties and money instead of children or love or art. Instead of focusing on a few worthy things (Perhaps a hobby? Perhaps a loved one?) we focus on more trivial, yet louder things.

And this choosing ties into what injustices we pay attention to in the society surrounding us and the larger world of which we are a part.

Rev. Karen G. Johnston, reflecting on attention, writes,

“What else is there in this world that my hustling and bustling have barred me from sensing and seeing? What else has my oblivion—self-induced or socially-constructed—hindered me from perceiving?

My guess is that it is not only delights… but violence, too, that’s within perception’s range, if only I gave it my true attention. Acts of exclusion, discrimination, and the impacts of systemic oppression are all there, right before me. I don’t always perceive them—I have been taught to not see them—but they are there, nevertheless.”

What happens when we do not notice and pay attention to and react to the social injustice that is all around us? The violence and discrimination. Not noticing can trickle into indifference. And a lot of this not noticing comes from a place of privilege – privilege grants people the freedom to not have to notice things – to not have to pay attention.

A privileged white child will often not even think about their own race and the implications of this until much later in life than a child of color will. Same with gender or class or any other privilege. The more privilege we have the more we can live without paying attention to the injustices surrounding us. Privilege means not needing to worry about the implications of simply being a person of color, or the implications of being poor, or the implications of being LGBTQIA+.

A white person does not have the same fear as a person of color when those flashing lights of a cop car pull up behind them.

A financially secure person need not face anxiety over their next meal.

A cis-gendered person need not worry where to go to the bathroom.

Not fearing violence from police, not worrying about a next meal, not worrying about what bathroom to use; this is privilege.

Alongside paying attention to privilege is paying attention to implicit bias – inherent prejudices we have because of the society we were raised in. These “isms” we have - perhaps racism or sexism or classism – these “isms” come from being raised in a society where racism and sexism and classism are the norm. This is the worldview of children in our culture – because of what we pay attention to. Even if we don’t want to think we have these “isms” they are there – the are implicit. Children grow up in this culture – watching tv, reading books, observing interactions in restaurants or on the sidewalk, watching the news – grow up in a society riddled with “isms,” with prejudice. Every person has these biases; placing judgments or feeling fear without consciously knowing why.

Working for good in this world begins with knowing that we have these biases and doing intentional work around it. It begins with noting privilege and all that this entails. If we draw our attention to oppression and discrimination, we can act – we can do work for good! And there is so much work to be done. Let us go out into the world and be a cause for good. Just as we hear that cricket, may we notice the injustice around us, and work for change.

What does it look like to live a life of attention?

Let us come together to work to notice injustice around us so we can be a force for good.

Let us be a part of the now instead of the culture of cameras and iPhones so that we are present to life’s gifts both in body and in spirit.

Let us hear the cricket instead of the coin – let us be intentional about what we choose to pay attention to – to be intentional about where we want our focus and our energy to lie.

Let us reflect on the legacy we will leave. Let this reflection, this retrospective work, let this allow us to really note where we are focusing our attention, and allow ourselves to gently reconsider any changes we may want to make.

Natalie Fenimore writes,

“We are all called.

Called by the wind, the rushing water, the fireflies, the summer sun.

Called by the sidewalk, the playground, the laughing children, the streetlights

Called by our appetite and gifts – our needs and challenges.

Called by the bottle, the needle, the powder, the pill, the game, the bet, the need, the want, the pain, the cure, the love, the hope, the dream.

Called by the Spirit of Love and Hope, and vision of God’s purpose for our lives

We are all called.

What do we choose? How do we answer?” /

There are so many things in life vying for our attention – it is entirely up to us which ones we will pay attention to. We are called by beauty and pain alike. We are called by laughing children, and we are called by the bottle. This is a conscious choice, now that we have been made aware of the dichotomies in our lives. The dried and washed dishes, or a game with the children. The calling of your heart. The injustices that surround us. What we choose to pay attention to truly affects us, our lives, and the way we interact with the world around us. Let us always be reminded of that sacred epitaph: “She attended well and faithfully to a few worthy things.”

May it be so, and amen.