

Sermon August 27, 2023
[Matthew 16:13-20]

Too Many Distractions
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Grace to you, and peace, from God the Creator and from Jesus, the living Son of God, who is the Christ, Amen.

I promise today's sermon will be relevant to each of you, if not directly, as I said at the outset of today's service, than indirectly, as evident, for example, in your kids, your grandkids, your friends, or your neighbors. So listen closely; there are two moments in this sermon, and they do actually relate.

I'd like to begin by conducting a thought experiment of sorts. It probably won't surprise you, because it involves space: If an alien visited America just 15 years ago, and then returned today, what fundamental difference in human behavior might stand out? More specifically, what extraordinary new habit has our species developed? One our ancestors could have never foreseen? It's a challenging question, yet one for which the journalist and political commentator Andrew Sullivan has an answer: "Just look around you," he writes, "at the people crouched over their phones as they walk the streets, or drive their cars, or walk their dogs, or play with their children. Observe yourself in line for coffee, or in a quick work break, or driving, or even just going to the bathroom. Visit an airport and see the sea of craned necks and dead eyes. We have gone from looking up and around," he writes, "to constantly looking down."

Have you seen this? Have you noticed this? There are so many examples, I don't know where to begin. Have you ever watched what happens when you try to take a phone away from a toddler? How much they scream and yell, or how much trouble they get into?

Or what about the movies? You know, as I've said before, that in Dante's *Inferno*, there are nine circles of hell. The ninth circle is reserved for people who text in movie theaters. They can't seem to stop themselves!

And what, as Sullivan points out, about distracted driving? Every time I'm on Mercer and I come to one of those lights, I look over at the people next to me, and half of the time they are on their phones. Or what about the bus stop? Yesterday I was driving past the bus stop and I saw four people, all standing in one line, each looking at their phone.

Or what about reading? In the last 10 or 15 years, has your attention span for books dwindled? Mine certainly has. Or what about writing? Can you guess how many times during the preparation of the sermon I check my phone? We have, in short, become enthralled, if not addicted, to our devices, to our portable screens. And if you think this is an exaggeration, consider what Sullivan wrote shortly before the pandemic. "We forget," he says, "that roughly 10 years ago, there were no smartphones. And as

recently as 2011, only a third of Americans owned one. Now nearly two thirds do; that figure reaches 85% when you're only counting young adults, and 46% of Americans told surveyors last year a simple but remarkable thing: They could not live without their phones. The device went from unknown to indispensable in less than a decade! The handful of spaces where it was once impossible to be connected – the airplane, the subway, the wilderness – are dwindling fast. Even hiker backpacks now come fitted with battery power for smartphones. Perhaps the only safe space that still exists is the shower. (And if you think that's wrong, I strongly advise you not to give it a try.)

So how did we get here? And why, more importantly, does it matter? Why am I talking about this in the sermon?

Well, let's start with the first of these questions. How did we get here? Once more I turned to Andrew Sullivan for an answer. He writes, "Since the invention of the printing press, every new revolution in information technology has prompted apocalyptic fears, the kind of which I'm stirring at the moment, from the panic that easy access to the Vernacular English Bible would destroy Christian orthodoxy, all the way to the revulsion in the 1950s at the barbaric young medium of television. Cultural critics have moaned and wailed, just like your pastor is doing right now, at every turn. Each shift represented a further fracturing of attention, continuing up to the previously unimaginable kaleidoscope of cable TV in the late 20th century, and the now infinitely multiplying spaces on the web. And yet society has always, it would seem, managed to adapt and adjust without obvious damage, and with some more-than-obvious progress, so it's perhaps too easy to view this new era of mass distraction in which we're living as something newly dystopian.

But I submit, as Sullivan does subsequently, that things are different now; that we are more distracted than we've ever been, not only as a country, but as a species. And that's because the gadgets we carry, our smartphones our androids, our iPhones, our laptops – the gadgets we carry are made and programmed in conjunction with the Internet to constantly lure us in. That's their purpose, to constantly lure us in, which is why the topic should concern all of us. Especially those of us who identify as people of faith.

Why? Two reasons. First, God wants us to be free, at least according to the Apostle Paul. "We are called to freedom," he proclaims in Galatians 5. But sin, understood by Paul in terms analogous to addiction, makes that kind of freedom nearly impossible to obtain. It compels us, as Paul says in Romans 7, to "do what we do not want to do." Whenever you find yourself feeling controlled by an alien power, going down another rabbit hole on YouTube, unable to constantly stop checking your phone, remember, as a Christian first and foremost, *you are called to freedom*. Put the phone down, turn the computer off, become what God intended.

The topic matters, secondly, because distractions diminish our spiritual senses, our capacity, that is, which has been developed over millennia, to encounter God in subtle ways. This is why the church must be a sanctuary for silence.

(And I'm aware here of the irony of speaking about silence.) "A sanctuary for silence." Let me explain what I mean here. During a worship service, Kyle and I deliberately insert moments of silence to cultivate your focus, your attention, your concern about what should truly matter most in your life. That's why we have a pause during the Prayer of the Day. That's why we have silence after the Hymn after the Sermon and before the Hymn of the Day. That's why we ring that bell periodically during the service. All of this is meant to cultivate those spiritual instincts that, because of this era of mass distraction, have atrophied. This is the one place, or perhaps one of the few places, where you can come, where silence is praised, where silence is glorified.

Without it, we not only fail to hear the Word of God speaking to us when a lesson is read, or when a sermon is preached, or when a hymn is sung. We also fail to hear God speaking to us through silence itself. Indeed, the Hidden God of the Jewish and Christian scriptures often spoke by not speaking, and Jesus, like the Buddha, revealed as much by his silences as by his words.

Think of the prophet Elijah, who encountered God at the top of Mount Horeb, another name for which is Mount Sinai, where Moses initially encountered God – but here not in wind, fire or an earthquake. Instead, Elijah encounters God "in that still small voice" that follows these things; "in the whispers" as the King James Version says, or "in the murmurs," if you go back to the original Hebrew. Elijah would have missed this encounter entirely if he was as distracted as we are, if he arrived at Horeb with headphones on, listening to music, or his favorite podcast. (Now, I thought that would be really funny. It was to me; it's fine if it's not to you, but I hope it makes the point.) So much of life is missed when we are constantly plugged in to devices that are meant to distract us.

Now, my point here is not to say that smartphones or laptops are the root of all evil. In many ways, these have changed our lives for the better. Think of all the conveniences for example, that come with this wonderful technology. Yet, like any technology, they come with a price tag, literally and figuratively. Not only can they become addictive, as I assume some of us in this room know, they can also distract us from what matters most in life by preventing us from hearing that still small, subtle voice which Elijah could know as God.

This is why I said earlier the church must be a sanctuary for silence, a respite for weary, frazzled, distracted travelers who wish to focus, if only for one hour a week, on *being* rather than *doing*: on being rather than doing.

This is why I'm glad to see each of you here today. The greatest threat to your humanity and mine, as well as our faith, is not hedonism. It's losing our souls in a sea of distractions, losing our souls in a sea of distractions. Of course, being distracted not

only prevents us from hearing God's word in song, speech, or especially silence; it also undermines our ability to read or interpret God's word.

Consider Matthew 16, our Gospel reading for today. It contains all kinds of potential distractions. Some people, for example, get hung up on verse 14, which says, "And they said [regarding the identity of Jesus,] some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

There are those who say, "Oh, clear proof in the Christian scriptures that reincarnation does not belong to the Buddhists alone!" Wrong! That's not in the Christian scriptures. Here, when we talk about John the Baptist as Jesus, that reflects a belief on the part of Herod and his court that Jesus was John resurrected from the dead, not reincarnated. "Or Elijah" – Elijah, as you know, is the only prophet in the entire Hebrew Bible who never died, who was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire, the belief being that at the beginning of the new age, he would return; so some speculated Jesus might be Elijah, returned to usher in a new age. "And still others Jeremiah" – Jeremiah, along with other prophets like Amos, talked about the coming day of the Lord, the advent of a new Messianic kingdom. And so, people speculated regarding Jesus's identity, in light of this tradition. That's one way, I think, to get lost in this passage, to lose the real significance of what happens here.

Another way is to get hung up on verse 20. Take a look if you'd like. This is where we hear that Jesus sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. Now that sounds really darn counterintuitive, doesn't it? I'm going to confirm Jesus seems to be saying that "I am indeed the Messiah, the Son of the living God, but don't tell anybody. Let's keep this under wraps." This is called the Messianic Secret, and upon further exploration, it's really not that mysterious after all: practically speaking, it could have been simply because Jesus didn't want to get overwhelmed with the crowds by this point in his ministry he was drawing. That's one possibility.

In the Gospel of Mark, however, I think a more compelling possibility is this: Jesus's full identity is not disclosed, until we see him suffering on the cross. He is not simply the Son of God. He's the crucified God. And it's at that moment, when the Centurion at the foot of the cross echoing Peter's confession here confirms that "Jesus was indeed the Son of the living God." That's another way however, to get distracted.

And yet the biggest distraction involves verse 18. It's one most of us have heard, especially if we grew up in the Roman Catholic tradition. Here the text says, "and I tell you, you are Peter, (which in Greek and before that Aramaic means "rock,") and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."

Now this passage, I submit, has long been read incorrectly as a basis for what's called Apostolic Succession – and this is not to Catholic-bash, it's simply to offer an alternative reading. And the alternative reading is this: Peter wasn't praised as the first Pope of the church. (Apostolic Succession means that Peter himself, the person, was

given authority by Christ to be the cornerstone, you might say, of the church, after which Peter's successors, the Popes that followed, carried that torch.)

But I think that the real focus here should not be on the *person* of Peter. That's a distraction. "And on this rock, that Christ would build His church."

It's the proclamation of Peter's faith. *That's* the rock upon which the church is built. The rock is Peter's *trust*, his conviction that Jesus is the Messiah!

This, then, is what I love about today's Gospel reading. If you focus on what's truly important, if you don't get distracted by other details, in the reading, however intriguing, you discover, as Martin Luther once said, that *you and I are Peter in this passage*. "Peter's mouth is my mouth," Luther says. The church was not built on one man who lived some 2000 years ago in the backwaters of the Roman Empire. The rock is his *confession*, and ours, that God has broken God's silence by whispering to us through Christ; that God has done something special through Him; that He is God's Son, and that through him, God's love has been poured out upon the world! Can I get an Amen for that?

Yes, it's true – and thank you for focusing. We live in an era of mass distraction. Yet by finding time to unplug, whether it's here in church, or in other activities of silence, meditation, walking during the week, we, too, can not only hear God, we can hear God *in and through* the silence. We can also hear Peter, whose proclamation is the Rock of the Church, and the heart of what we believe.

And all God's people said "Amen."