

## Attention

Lent 3A: John 4.5-42

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A few years ago, our daughter Kate gave me a dogeared paperback she'd read for a class in college. On the cover is a photograph apparently taken underneath a boardroom table. We see four identical briefcases set next to four identical chairs and four pairs of legs in identical creased grey trousers, but only three pairs of shiny black shoes. Two of those grey-trousered legs are sprouting from fuzzy orange lion head slippers.

The book is titled *The Pursuit of Attention*. It was first published in 1979 by a sociologist named Charles Derber. Maybe you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but some book covers can be judged to be way better than others.

Have you ever considered your life in terms of attention? From whom do you seek it. To what and to whom do you been taught to give it? Whom do you dismiss or ignore? Have you ever felt like you wasted too much of your attention on too many of the wrong things at the end of a day? Or maybe I should ask when's the last time you didn't feel at least a little like that.

At the end of my life, it's not much of an overstatement to say I think I just want to have given most of my attention mostly to matters and relationships worthy of this precious gift that each of us receives a new bundle of from God each day we wake up in this world.

In the fourth chapter of John, Jesus gives away more of his attention to one person than he does anywhere else in any of the gospels. It might have caught your attention when you opened your order of service this morning that the gospel lesson takes up more than a full page. This is what the lectionary does to us as Lent rolls on. No judgment if you had to pull out your phone and check a few emails while Jim was reading. But the length of this conversation is part of its message. At noon, in the Samaritan city called Sychar, resting from his journey at Jacob's well, Jesus talks to a Samaritan woman for a long, long time.

Maybe you already know some of the reasons why Jesus shouldn't have been talking to this woman at all. But it's worth laying them out before we get to anything particular that these two people say.

First, she's a woman. Barbara Brown Taylor, who I can't wait to have in this pulpit again in a week and a half, says women weren't just less than liberated in Jesus's day. Women weren't allowed to worship with men, whose morning devotions included the prayer, "Thank God I am not a woman." Some especially pious men were known as "blind and bruised" because they would close their eyes when they met a woman in public, even if it meant walking into a wall. Barbara also points out that this woman was probably drawing water at noon because she'd been shunned even by the other women who would gather at the well in the cool of the morning. We'll learn why that was probably so in a minute.

She was also a Samaritan before the adjective "good" got forever hitched to the term in a parable. To religious purists, "Samaritan" would have meant something like "half-breed heretic." And as the conversation that never should have happened gets going, we learn of

the likely reason this woman had been shunned even by other Samaritan women: she's had five husbands so far, and she's currently shacking up with somebody else.

This woman would have stood out like a pair of orange lion slippers in a row of respectable black oxfords as someone Jesus shouldn't have given even a sidelong glance of his attention to. But he does, doesn't he. He gives her a whole lot of attention. Let's see how it goes.

What we know from the text is that Jesus was tired from the morning's walk, and probably thirsty. Maybe he was thirsty enough to risk asking this woman for water, but if actual water was what he was in need of, you wouldn't think he'd let the conversation drift off into some metaphorical spring gushing up into eternal life. No, this seems like genuine, sustained attention, doesn't it.

But knowing what we do about this woman, the quality of her attention may be more remarkable than Jesus's. Maybe she's been shunned and diminished and ignored for so many different reasons that she's got nothing left to lose. Because or in spite of all that, she stands toe to toe with Jesus. When he asks her for a drink, she doesn't avert her eyes or mumble. She also doesn't politely avoid how many norms are being violated in his request. Quite the opposite. She names them: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" Then Jesus goes into the gushing spring of living water bit. But in doing so, he's not evading the here and now. He's adding another dimension to this conversation that never should have happened. Not only is he going to ask this woman for water, he's going to talk to her about the deepest mysteries of his mission as well. More than he will tell any of his disciples when he calls them.

I love the way the woman remains grounded in the real. She says, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" Jesus has given her his full attention, and she has given him back the gift of her own, not with evasions or by pretending she understands something she does not. She stays engaged because she actually wants to hear what he has to say and to receive what he might have to offer. "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

It's fascinating to read this story on the heels of the story of Nicodemus last week, isn't it? The religious leader with all kinds of power and authority at stake comes to Jesus at night. This Samaritan woman with nothing to lose talks to Jesus under the noonday sun. But both of these prove they actually want the truth from Jesus, not just confirmation of what they already believe, when they admit their confusion and stay present. Each of them is showing each of us what truthful attention looks like.

The Samaritan woman doesn't look away even as the story wends its way through her five marriages and her sixth lover, as it names the different ideas Samaritans and Jews have about where to worship and their common hope for Messiah, the anointed one who, in the woman's words, "will proclaim all things to us." To which Jesus says, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." His self disclosure continues with the one he's not supposed to tell anything to at all.

Then the disciples return, and they are everything the woman is not. Or rather, the woman is everything the disciples are not. The disciples are predictably offended that Jesus was speaking to her. But they say nothing. The men clam up, avert their eyes, fill the scene with the awkward silences that she refuses to be satisfied with. The woman, once again in contrast, leaves her jar at the well to proclaim right out loud, "Come and see a man who

saw me for who I am, and still paid me more clear-eyed attention than anyone ever has in my life.”

Could we learn to look at each other like this? Could we learn to look at the stranger, the sinner, the heretic, the outsider we’ve been conditioned to ignore or worse ... could we learn to pay attention to the likes of these just as Jesus and this woman paid attention to each other in spite of everything? I think we can.

A few weeks ago I got an email from someone who’s been a faithful Calvary parishioner for decades. As she got out of her car one Sunday, she saw a man on the sidewalk who was growing increasingly angry. His muttering got louder until he was almost shouting when our facilities manager Richard Hendricks walked up to the man, called him by name, asked him what was wrong, affirmed his anger, and the two walked off together, chatting calmly. Later, in church, the parishioner sought Richard out and commented on what she’d seen. He nonchalantly said something about deescalation as if it was all in a Sunday’s work.

The email closed with the mention that there were other, milder incidents of the sort we’re accustomed to in a downtown Memphis church. And then she said this: “During my drive home, I realized that I had experienced a certain shift in my perspective, an ability to “see” most everything in a different, and for the moment, a better way. I have even felt physically lighter.”

I was moved by this email. The event itself was the result of Richard’s carrying out the deescalation training Christine Todd and Bill Etnyre made available to Calvary staff, outreach volunteers, ushers, security guards and others. But I suddenly realized that deescalation assumes that the kind of attention we pay to the world changes that world, including the world of a curious, open hearted onlooker at times. If the attention we pay is mostly judgment, concerned with self justification for ourselves while we make sure other people get what we think they deserve, well we know how people like the Samaritan woman and that man on the sidewalk will fare. But it is possible to learn how to pause before we respond to the world in the ways we’ve been conditioned to respond and choose another way. We can learn give someone our gentle attention, like Richard did that day, instead of immediately trying to set them straight.

Friends, I want to draw as bright a line as possible between these experiences at Calvary and the way Jesus and the Samaritan woman paid attention to each other. There were systems and stories in place set up to determine how they were supposed to see each other, but they refused to grant those systems and stories power. Likewise, our world has conditioned us to respond to the Samaritan woman in our midst with things like judgment and punishment, if we notice her at all. But over and over again, aren’t judgment and punishment precisely what Jesus sets aside to pay a different kind of attention to his world?

If you woke up into your life again today, God has granted you another basket of attention. Whether we have five more minutes or fifty more years of it is not ours to know. But so many more lives than we can imagine will be affected by the kind of attention we pay them. So, Jesus and one brave woman ask us, what will determine how and to whom you will give the rest of your life’s attention away?