



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, MAY 14, 2023
ACTS 17:14a,22-31; PSALM 66:7-18; 1 PETER 3:13-22; JOHN 14:15-21

PAYING ATTENTION TO “THE GOOD NEWS”

John 14:15-21 [Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

”I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”]

This past week, my oldest child, was chatting with me about the news. One of his classes has him analyzing the news cycle and he was wondering aloud why the news is, almost entirely, bad. Is this really the news, he said, or do we choose only to report about the bad stuff. He said, in the coverage he’s been studying, the news seems only ever to be about crime, war, heated political division, economic problems, and natural disasters. Our

“news” today has become somewhat synonymous with “bad news.”

He wondered with me about our society’s apparent bad-news bias: have we developed a preference for seeking out the bad stuff, our bias having us see only now what we expect to see? And if that’s what’s at work, can we lose this bias? Learn to see the world more positively, perceive it more hopefully, notice what’s going on from a more life-giving perspective? Or is this just the way it is, he asked me. As you

might imagine, I'm never one to miss an opportunity to share the power of the Good News! ... and so we explored some ideas together.

I wonder if you've seen any of the short videos, there are a few versions now on YouTube, that have been made to demonstrate something about the way we notice. Two groups of basketball players, one group in white, the other in black are moving around the screen, the voiceover tells us "this is a test of selective attention, count how many times the players wearing white pass the ball" – for about a minute or so the players in white and the players in black move around, passing the basketball between them, our attention is fixed on the ball as we try to count the number of passes. The voiceover asks "how many passes did you count?" ... "the correct answer" the voice says "is 15 passes. But did you see the gorilla?"¹

For those of you who've not yet seen this film, (which I've now completely ruined for you, by the way) this question I can attest, comes out of nowhere, is completely unexpected. The film then replays and we are amazed to see that

someone dressed in a gorilla suit walks right through the middle of the players, was there the whole time, and wasn't seen, was totally unnoticed. How could I possibly not have seen it? I didn't see it because I wasn't looking for it. I didn't see it because I was paying attention to something else.

This experiment's used to suggest that humans just aren't capable of seeing everything all at once, and so we develop and deploy attention biases to limit what we take in from our information rich world. Biases that direct our attention to details we consider to be most useful, or important. These attention preferences are powerful and can leave us oblivious to the things we're not looking for. There was a gorilla and I didn't see it. It was right there, and I didn't see it.

Now, in a society rife with inequities, racism, economic disparity, social injustices, it is our biases, it's suggested, that prevent us from seeing the whole picture, our biases that have some of us see certain things while other things remain entirely unseen, despite being obvious and

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWSxSQsspiQ>; this is the video which accompanies this study: Simons, D. J., & Chabris, C. F.

(1999). *Gorillas in Our Midst: Sustained Inattentive Blindness for Dynamic Events*. *Perception*, 28(9), 1059–1074.

clearly visible to those who know full well they are there and can see them clearly.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus appears to acknowledge this phenomenon as he counsels the disciples.

After really only a short while with them, Jesus has become the focal point of the disciples' attention. And now he is preparing them for the time when he'll no longer be physically present.

The time is coming when they'll no longer be able to touch him, or hear his voice, when they'll no longer be able to witness his physical presence, his actions, his responses. Having Jesus with them has allowed the disciples to rest in a pretty steady state, as we learn from our gospel texts, of not really knowing for sure what's going on, not fully understanding, not really knowing what's important, and that's been ok because Jesus has been there for them to pay attention to, there to show them: to teach, to guide, to reassure.

It is, perhaps, not being entirely certain about what's important, not being absolutely sure that's allowed the disciples to be open and receptive to what Jesus has been showing them, to the new ways in which Jesus has been teaching them to see, to perceive what has always been there. In a world full of bias, full of certitude, with

perception closed off to so many things, to so much that lay right in front of them, Jesus keeps their attention on him that he might show them what they've been missing all along, and keep them open to new realities.

How easy it would be, then, for them to slip back into the ways of the world when he's gone, back to its learned biases, to live, once again, neck deep in certitude and fixed beliefs, with narrow vision, seeing only what they expect to see and confusing this will all there is.

Jesus knows this risk and reassures his disciples that he will send the Spirit to accompany them in his place, to walk with them as they continue on The Way. And the Spirit will be, as Jesus was during his life, unknown by the world because a world closed off to the fullness of life-giving possibility, narrowed by a focus on those things society says are important, this world doesn't know God, because it doesn't see God alive and everywhere, infused in everything all around and within each of us. The world's attention is not trained to be on God.

Jesus explains that the abiding communion he experiences with the Father will be shared by the disciples, will be shared by all who believe. This Spirit,

the abiding Spirit, won't come and go, unreliable, unpredictable, hard to find ... but as Jesus has been, so the Spirit will be²: constant, ever-present, teacher, guide, comforter, source of healing power and true accompaniment in it all. We can depend on the presence of the Spirit, become attentive to the movement of the Spirit. It is to be a new life 'in the Spirit.'³

This is a life, that if chosen, and cultivated through prayer and life in community, this is a life that has the power to focus our attention in a life-giving way, prevent us from seeing only bad news; this life in the

Spirit has the power to free us from the illusion of certainty, that's fed by our biases; keeping us, instead, open and questioning, unsure but confident as we return time and again to the in-dwelling of the Spirit, to our ever-present teacher and guide, that we might 'see' and so be bearers of the Good News in Christ. Each one of us is empowered, and, with right attention, can be creative and generative in our response to this broken world, each one of us ... true Temples of the Holy Spirit of God⁴.



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² John 14:26

³ Romans 8:2, 4-5

⁴ 1 Corinthians 6:19