

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Psalm 52; Colossians 1:15-28

“Attending to Christ and his Kingdom”

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This summer some of you may have had the opportunity to go on some vacations to get away from regular life. I have had the opportunity to take some trips and one of the trips my family and I often get to do is to go to a family camp. My wife and I met at Calvin Crest, a Presbyterian camp in California, where we were working on staff. We have many friends that we go back and see and spend time with. We got the chance to go and leave our normal lives; to leave all of the tasks, and the house, and our dog, and go and participate in this.

In the midst of this life, we got to sit with speakers who would teach from the Word of God every day. [Pastor Bill shows a picture.] This was ‘50s night, and he wasn’t dressed this way all week. [Referring to the picture.] [Laughter.] We had friends who were leading us in worship with all of our families. The kids and parents had opportunities to play. We were in the high ropes course. We had all family games. We had time for fellowship – to catch up with one another, to spend time enjoying and celebrating together.

In the midst of this week and at the end of this week, we felt like we were centered on Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God.

Then I came back home and I found that coming home had distractions: There were chores to do; there were bills to pay; there were people talking to me on Facebook, saying outrageous things; there was Twitter; there was G-mail; things demanding my attention. Life was different than it was when I was at family camp, where someone made all of the meals for us and we didn’t do any laundry, because that happened after we got back home.

I was immersed again in an “attention” economy. There is a multi-billion-dollar industry now that doesn’t ask for any money from us – all it wants is our attention. Silicon Valley has amassed these massive companies that live off of one metric. That metric is gaining more of our attention, and it is difficult to combat that. They have the most brilliant minds in our country working to keep us attending longer and longer to them.

So, there is so much calling for our attention. For me, I have my chores. I have my phone. Now you might recall from another sermon that I gave that I’m something of a cyborg: I intentionally incorporate technology in my life. I wear an Apple watch, I carry my iPhone. I have ear pieces for me to hear. So, it is a difficult thing when the devices that keep me connected seek to pull my attention in different directions. On top of that, I don’t know what your passions are. For some of you it might be some sport – maybe you are in a summer baseball – and, I love politics.

Iowa is a great place for politics. There is no doubt about it. It is like watching spring training for somebody going through the primary. I love walking through the primary.

But, there is always something happening in politics, and this week there was stuff that demanded a response. I had friends who are connected to me via Twitter and I have fellow pastors of other races who were asking of other pastors: “How will you respond to the rhetoric of this week; to the Tweets from our President, to a rally where people were chanting ‘send them back,’ or ‘send her back?’”

This is a difficult task for a pastor, because when we can encounter this, there are people who see this so differently. There are people who almost experience it as if they are in two different worlds, and it is difficult to speak truth into that. At the same time, we are compelled as the Church of Jesus Christ, and particularly in the Presbyterian Church, where we affirm the Barnum Declaration. This is the declaration written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his Chiesa Church in Germany over and against the Nazi party. This is part of what we embrace in the Presbyterian Church, and it is a commitment to always be ready to call our nation and our government to something better, to be a prophetic voice.

That is a place that I have had to hold this week, as I have responded to those as a pastor. I have had to say that the rhetoric that we see falls short of the image of our Lord Jesus Christ. It does not conform to the values of our church and we, as a church, need to stand against that kind of rhetoric and call our leaders to something better.

Now, back to my sermon.

There is so much calling for our attention. There is so much asking for us throughout our day – from the time we wake up until we go to bed at night. How do we attend to Christ and his kingdom?

There are four passages today in our lectionary. It is our practice in our congregation, and in many congregations, to follow the *Revised Common Lectionary*. The pastors describe this occasionally and, from time to time, we will explain it. It is our practice to select two of the passages from the lectionary. There are actually four and there are four every day but, in particular, there are four on Sundays and we choose two. I have chosen two to read in this service, but actually all four of them work together today. They have a common theme of attending to God.

We read Psalm 52 and Luke 10, which is the story of Mary and Martha, and Colossians 1. I’m going to preach on all four of them, so we will be here forever – but there will be nice pictures. [Laughter.]

The writer of Amos captured the prophesy of Amos. Amos was a prophet in a time when the government, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, the northern and southern kingdoms that had been divided, were at this enormously prosperous time. Their GDP was going through the roof. They were wealthy and, in the midst of this military and economic wealth, they were not following God and God’s teachings. Amos saw this and he was called by God to rebuke them.

In the midst of their wealth, they were doing things to the poor, rather than out of abundance helping those who had the least, they were ignoring the things that God had asked of them.

You have likely heard before from this pulpit, or Scripture, that God called the people of Israel to leave the gleanings in the fields. The purpose of this was that the very poorest among them could go and find the last scraps of wheat and grain in the fields, so they could survive.

But, Amos condemned these in the midst of their wealth and their fixation on that. They were not content with this massive economy. They were persecuting the poor. They were selling the sweepings he claimed of them and not only were they doing that to the poor, they were cheating them. They were using unfair measures.

He said, “You are adjusting your shekels and your weights, so that you can cheat the poor. And, you are taking advantage of the most-needy among you. You have forgotten what God asked of you to be.” He said, “You buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals.”

They had forgotten who God had asked them to be. In addition, they had developed a pagan piety. This is what I mean by that: They were both following the idols of others of the nations around them, but worse or more significantly, they were treating their relationship with the God who created this kingdom, like the idol worshippers were. They were acting as though their task was to give the sacrifice to the idols at the temple worship and then go about their day living however they wanted to.

It was a life of faith where they would fulfill their obligation and then it had no effect on the rest of their life. Out of this came this poor treatment of the poor. It came with corruption and perversion of justice. They were turning away from God; the one who had created them and brought them into this Promised Land; the one who had helped them to come to this place of being a great people.

In Psalm 52, we see this rebuke. This is a psalm of David. It is accounted that he is speaking to an adversary, and he is describing who this adversary is, and this adversary is a strong man. He is someone who revels in being feared, who appreciates using untruths. Like a dictator, he is speaking against one who has put his strength and his hope in his own power, and his ability to destroy others. He confronts him [the adversary]: “You have not taken refuge in God. Rather, you have taken refuge in your own strength, and you revel in evil, and God will uproot you.”

And, in contrast, the psalm describes David as an olive tree that is living in the house of God; who finds its substance in God; who takes refuge in God; and, he says, “I will praise your name for ever and I will trust in you.”

So, in the first text, we have Amos calling Israel back to something God had desired for them. In the second text, we see an extension of the evil and the brokenness that those in power of the two kingdoms and the corruption was leading to this, this evil man – and the contrast of David, who loved God and sought after God.

The third text is Mary and Martha. This is in the Gospel of Luke, in Chapter 10. Last week I was not here, but I know it was scheduled for Jan to preach on the Good Samaritan and I’m assuming that happened. So, this is the story that immediately follows that.

Luke captures the story of Martha inviting and opening her home for Jesus. That seems like an awfully nice thing to do. Martha opens her home for Jesus. He comes in and Jesus is teaching there.

Luke records that Martha was distracted by the domestic work. She was busying herself with the task of providing a meal, probably, and she came and she complained to Jesus about her sister Mary, who is sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to the teachings, as Jesus was bringing a word about the Kingdom of God.

She said to Jesus, "Why won't you make my sister help me? You see that she is letting me do all of this work." This is a very complicated, challenging word back to her: Jesus said, "You are anxious about many things, but only one thing was necessary, and Mary has chosen it, and I'm not going to take it away from her."

Now, as scholars look at this, we might be enticed to think that this means we don't have to do anymore housework. But, I don't think that is it. It's also – you know this question – should we attend to piety? Should we listen to God and care about the word of God, and ignore the practical tasks in front of us?

That is not the answer, either. In part we know that, because it's held side by side with the story of the Good Samaritan, which is this acting out of our faith. So, it's not that we should not be acting out, rather it is like this warning that when we are even doing tasks for the Kingdom of God serving Jesus Christ, they may distract us. They can pull us away from what is necessary and important.

What was in Martha's mind? I don't know. I know what it might be if I were hosting. I might be thinking about the image of my house and how I want people to perceive it. I might be thinking about wanting to bring honor to him in such a way it might be important. Jesus seems to be saying to her, those things aren't important, just put together a simple meal, but don't be distracted. We are here to do something greater than that.

And finally, 1 Colossians – the actual text, and the fourth and longest sermon of today. (I'm concerned that none of you laughed at that.) [Followed by laughter.]

We have the Apostle Paul, who is writing to the church which he has supported and founded. They are struggling and he is writing to them. We hear in the midst of this a doxology of Paul. It is this beautiful statement of who he has grown to understand Jesus to be. This is near the end of his ministry, as scholars understand it. They expect that he wrote this around 86 CE or 60 CE. He was converted around 35 CE, so this is 25 years after his conversion – after he has founded many churches. He has been on three missionary tours, and has grown and written these incredible things about what it means to understand who Jesus Christ is. He pours out this confession of faith about who Jesus is, and the supremacy of Jesus Christ. First, he confesses to this church that Jesus is the very image of the invisible God – the one who God was pleased to indwell with the fullness of himself.

He describes that all things were created through him and for him, that all things are held together in him – and he wasn't just describing the trees, and the plants, and the stones, and whatever it is that we happen to make. He was describing all of the thrones, the dominions, the powers, the seats of Congress and all of our political abilities. He was saying that Christ is the one through whom all of creation was made; the one for whom all of creation was made, and the one who holds all of this together. Paul, as he heard Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God, as he wrestled with Jesus' death and the Resurrection, came to understand that everything was held together by Jesus Christ; and, that when he focused on Jesus Christ, and put Christ in the center, and understood everything through its relationship to Jesus Christ, he saw the kingdom of God.

He said to this group, who were not Jews initially – they were people outside of the Jewish faith – that they have sent to us this mystery that has been revealed finally in our generation: the mystery that Christ is in you; the hope of glory. This God who came and was resurrected, lives in you.

For Paul, all of his life was attending to Christ and his kingdom. How do we do this? You know, there are those who are called to live in a monastery. I am not called to live in a monastery. I don't know of any among us who are in such an order. We are called to live in the rest of our world.

So here today, in this Sanctuary – that calls us to this attention on God. How, once we leave this place, do we keep Christ in the center of our lives?

You know, I have found that, for me, I needed to move away from the distractions of the digital world. (Now, this literally shocked my staff when they came into a meeting and I pulled out a paper planner. They were like, "What? Bill has paper?") This is part of what I needed to do as I came back into this world. I needed to find the things that were distracting me and move to something else. So, I have gone back and forth from digital calendars and planners, and paper planners throughout my life. Right now I am going to paper to help me focus, to help me think about what the habits are in my life, to help me see what it is that God would want from me. And whatever it is; whatever the habits that we do; what are the habits that help us attend to our Lord Jesus Christ; to the God who is the center of the Universe – the one for whom all things are reconciled for justice happens? What do we need in our daily lives? That is the question for each of us to consider. What is good for us? What helps us to keep our attention on the Kingdom of God?

So, poor Amos, he called the people of Judah and Israel to come back to the God who created them. For in the Psalm, we saw the strong man and the one who is rooted in the Kingdom of God. In Mary and Martha, we saw one who is distracted when the tasks come around, and the one who is attending to Jesus Christ. And, in Paul's confession, we hear his love for and the centrality of Jesus Christ.

As we hear these examples, let us bring to the center of our lives the God of our Universe – the one through whom all things were made. The one for whom all things were made, because when we are attending to Christ and his kingdom, we are not distracted by the wealth in such a way that we would abuse the poor. Rather, we are concerned for them and we are seeking to bring justice and reconcile our world.

Amen.