

Here
First Reading: Hebrews 10:19-25
Second Reading: John 19:26-27

For Bible study this week, I had come across a helpful quote that I had not yet vetted, and so I sought to preface the quote with the admission that I didn't know anything about the writer. I needed an out in case I later discovered the speaker to be doing 5-10 in Sing Sing for a pyramid scheme. I told them I had been burned before. Over twenty years ago in a sermon, I had shared some saccharin quote, probably about family or marriage, from the noted North Carolinian, Charles Kuralt. After worship, a friend and attorney approached with one of those gotcha grins on his face. "You know, Matt, it just came out that he led a double life." D-oh!

I told this to the Bible study, and suddenly, everybody perked up, came to attention — "What?" "Who?" "The CBS guy?" "I hadn't heard this!" "Tell me more." Questions, memories, answers were popping back and forth across the room like pickleballs in a retirement community. Then, from the back of the room, I heard someone exclaim, "Squirrel!" "Rabbit!" (*Had to be Dan, right?*)

He nailed it. His diagnosis for what was going on, what I had let loose in the room, was spot on. We were on a path, moving forward, but as any dog owner knows, when you are walking, just the slightest sight or scent of a rabbit or squirrel, just the tiniest distraction, and a quiet walk turns into a separated shoulder, as the dog launches into the hunt. I had immediately lost the room. Whiplash was setting in. It was an aside, with no connection to the subject of the day, but it was just enough to send minds, thoughts, and questions racing toward the scent. Rabbit! Squirrel! We share more in common with the average golden-doodle than our shared class of mammal.

Distraction. It's a thing, isn't it? How large a role do distractions play in your life? Most likely more than you think. Fifty years ago, when the phone rang, the world stopped as everyone in the house raced to the breakfast room to answer it, abiding some strange cultural convention that it was rude to let it ring more than three times, as if picking up after the fourth ring would convey you were doing something illicit. Hello!? *Did I interrupt something? Did I wake you up?*

The phone was loud; and it was certainly a distraction; and if you were watching tv, you couldn't pause the program, you just missed it until it came out in reruns; but apart from a couple of years with teenagers in the house, it wasn't all that frequent. However, today, thanks to the Apple Watch, you can't express a single thought without distraction — *What I'm trying to (ping) say ... what I trying to say, is that (ping) is that if you want (ping) if you want to connect with someone, you may (ping) you may need to focus your attention.*

The electricians are working overtime rewiring our brains, trying to keep up with our delusion that we can master many things at once. Admit it, who here has put your phone on speaker, leaving your hands free to surf the web when you know the person calling is a talker and so this could be a while? Have you ever been busted? You know, the loquacious caller is operating on some higher level stream of consciousness where periods, or any other pause of punctuation, are profane, and so you've learned to throw in a few uh-huhs at intervals along the way, while you are simultaneously checking out the specs on that Austin Healy restomod or that end table on Etsy you've been eyeing. But suddenly, there is silence on the line, and it occurs to you that this silence may have begun with a question mark? But

you don't know what the question was, or even the subject that prompted the question. Busted.

Distractions expose the myth of effective multi-tasking where people are involved. I remember a job listing for a pastor in a techie university town that heralded the privilege of serving in "the most connected city in America." We think we are more connected than ever, and yet, we've never felt so alone ... and we don't even realize that we are in large part doing this to ourselves.

On the popular Netflix series, *Drive to Survive*, we are taken behind the scenes of Formula 1 racing, to see who these drivers really are (*sarcasm intended*). Well, in their training and warmups, we'll see a driver standing before a board of colored lights/buttons set in a grid pattern. Individual colors on the grid will randomly light up at a quickening pace and the driver is supposed to press each button when it lights up. It tests the driver's reflexes and tunes the driver's ability to keep up with a rapid-fire machine gun of data and sensory information coming at the driver at 180mph. Can the driver juggle all that and stay on the road? Their capacity to process all of that and manage that is remarkable, but I don't care who you are, you

cannot do that with people. People are not meant to be managed like the dials on a dashboard or the curves in Monte Carlo.

Like the flakes falling from a January Vermont sky, every person is unique with different faces, different stories, individual emotions, quirky habits, unique challenges, varied dreams. The hope for humanity is not for us to manage a person, but to know a person.

In the gospel of John, we find a Jesus portrayed as self-aware and self-assured. When Jesus is in the room, it is apparent that Jesus owns the room, not by coercion or intimidation, rather, in each scene from the hillside to the upper room, to the face-to-face with Pontius Pilate, and even upon the cross, you can sense that Jesus is the presence of authority and knowledge. His sense of self is never compromised. So, in John's Jesus, we see more of love's strength and power than of the vulnerability that love requires. In John's telling, there is no cry of dereliction from the cross, no sense of feeling forsaken by God. Even as he is crucified on the cross, it seems that Jesus is calmly directing the scene around him. And so, here in John, Jesus' first words from the cross are not words of panic, pain, or despair, but words to convey the meaning of what the self-giving of love necessitates.

“Standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.”

Now, centuries of study have added layers and layers of questions and interpretations to the Gospels, some of it worthy, some of it not so much. Why is Jesus’ mother identified as present at the cross in John, but not individually named in the other Gospels? Was she there? Mary, mother of James and Mary Magdalene get a shout out, but not Mom. What are we to make of this “disciple who Jesus loved”? Is it John? Who does he represent? Is Mary’s presence symbolic here?

Or, there’s always my question, why is everyone named Mary in the Gospels? I’ve been studying this for 40 years and I still cannot keep them straight. Questions, conjectures, connections, exegesis, explication: There is much here worthy of study and conversation. Yet, I’d ask us to set all of that aside for a moment and look at what the text gives to us, for it is something beautiful and we could miss it if we don’t give it our full attention.

Jesus “*said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.*” Jesus’ dying thought, what he wanted to express with the last bit of life and breath left in him, was to look upon two people we know he knew and loved, and to sew an unbreakable thread between them and to him. We don’t really know how well, or even if, Mary and the disciple knew one another, but Jesus knew them, and Jesus knew their hope, their future was to be bound together through him.

Here is your mother. Here is your son. Clear your mind of all the distractions, the what-ifs, the fears, the worries that you may miss networking with or being seen by someone more important. To the best of your ability, minimize the intrusions and silence the pings, and pay attention to the person Christ places before you, life places before, circumstance places before. That is someone important in the eyes of Jesus and worthy of your attention.

“Here is your son.” “Here is your mother.” Here. Here, right now. Sure, there are many things worthy of attention, and there is a time and a place for that, but there at the cross, amidst the chaos and violence of it all, Jesus

pulls two of his beloved face to face. Here is your mother, your son, your friend, your sibling, someone beloved by Christ and worthy of your attention. Do you see them? Do you see someone Christ loves? That's where hope begins.

You know, we shaped this sanctuary with intention, to grant us the privilege to see the face of Christ in our neighbor. Do you see them? They are not labels. They are not stereotypes. They are sinners, but so are you. They have responsibilities, joys, burdens, flaws, gifts, good days, and bad days. They cannot fit in the box you made for them. They can make you laugh and they can disappoint you. But you are theirs and they are yours and together we are Christ's, loved by Christ and called by Christ to take what we experience here, and what we pay attention to here, out into the world as a sign of Christ's love for the world, armed not with hate, not with labels, not with presumption, but with grace. The author of Hebrews understood the importance of this endeavor we share. Hebrews counsels us — *“Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”*

I'll admit that I am probably not nearly as popular as you are, and consequently, my phone doesn't ping all that often, but when it does, I find that a majority of the pings are not all that important — *Ping!* See what the person you haven't seen since graduation 45 years ago posted on Facebook; *Ping!* Pro Rugby is coming to Charlotte; *Ping!* Only 12 hours left on the sale at Brooks Brothers ... *okay*. Rabbit! Squirrel!

Remember the mention of the unvetted quote I shared with the Bible Study? Turns out, the author, Howard Rheingold, is a writer “known for his specialties on the cultural, social and political implications of modern communication media.” (*Wikipedia*) I can't vouch for his writings or perspective, yet I found this thought to be, not just timely and profound, but descriptive of what Christ was conveying from the cross to his mother and the beloved disciple, and thus to the church, also. *Here is your son. Here is your mother.* Rheingold's observation? “Attention is a limited resource, so pay attention to where you pay attention.” Amen.