

**Sunday, August 16, 2015**  
**Living the Life: Pay Attention**  
Psalm 111 & Mark 13:33-37

We're continuing our "Living the Life" series today. Last week was an invitation to show up to your life, to God and to others, even when you don't feel ready. God can do a lot with a person who is willing, even when they're not ready.

Today, we'll explore what it looks like to pay attention. Because once we strengthen our show up muscle, and it becomes a little more natural, then we retrain our eyes and hearts to notice what's really going on around us. But sometimes we don't pay attention very well...

*Ask two people to have a conversation about the weather and to ignore whatever I try to do or say. I try to get their attention for a little bit. Illustrates the annoyance of a toddler saying, "Mom, Mom, Dad, Dad, Mom, Mom..."*

This started in my home sometime last year. I read one day there was something we could try. When Isabella wants my attention but I'm talking to someone else, I asked her to come over to me and put her hand on my arm. This is her way of saying she wants my attention. She keeps her arm there until I pause my conversation, lean over and look her in the eyes and say, "You have my full attention."

It was pretty choppy at first. It's still doesn't always work. But after a couple weeks of consistently trying this, it's actually helping. There are other moments in our day where she'll say from the back seat, "Mom I want your full attention."

**[PP SLIDE]** Do you have a child or grandchild in your life? That's all they really want from us. Our full attention. In the electronic-gadget-everywhere-world we live in today, **our full attention is a rare gift to others.**

## Stay awake

*Jesus said to his disciples, "Be awake. Be alert. You do not know when the time will come. It is like a man travelling abroad. He leaves home and places his servants in charge, each with his own work. And he orders the gatekeeper to be on watch. So I tell you, watch. You do not know when the Lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cock crow, or in the morning. May he not come suddenly and find you asleep. What I say to you, I say to all: stay awake."* –Mark 13:33-37

I used to think this passage was Jesus saying, "Watch out, people. You better do it right, or I'm going to get you. You better be ready, because you never know when I'm coming." The more I've studied it, I now don't think this is what Jesus intended at all. He's not talking about the second coming of Christ or about our death.

He's talking about the *forever coming of Christ*. The reality that we're invited to stay awake and aware of God's presence in this moment on a Sunday morning...at school on a Tuesday...during a family meal on Thursday night...during a quiet moment in nature on a Saturday morning. Because Christ is *always coming, always present*. It's **we who aren't!**

We're always somewhere else, at least I often am. Jesus tells us to be conscious, to be awake, alert and alive. It's the key to all spirituality, because it's the one thing we aren't. Be honest. Most of us live on cruise control. We go through the motions. We wake up and we repeat what we did the day before, and we're upset if there are any interruptions.

But God has the best chance at getting to us in the gaps, the surprises, the interruptions. This is what it means to be awake: to be constantly willing to say that God could even be coming to me in this! Even in this! I'm learning to say this even in the midst of things I don't want, don't expect and don't like. ("To Be Awake Is to Live in the Present," [Collection of Homilies 2008](#)).

**[PP SLIDE]** I saw this phrase somewhere a couple years ago and it stuck with me. **Be fiercely present.** In a day full of distractions, it takes incredible effort to be present and pay attention. So maybe your prayer is, “God, help me be fiercely present in this situation.”

One of my colleagues is doing a great job of working on this. Rev. Hannah Bonner serves at St. John’s UMC in Houston. She’s spent the last month holding vigil at the Waller County Sheriff’s department, where Sandra Bland, died after three days in jail because of a traffic stop. Hannah shared on social media that the Sheriff had been kind, shared water, allowed people to wait inside where it was cool, until something happened over the weekend. And now earlier this week, Hannah heard the sheriff say, “go back to that church of Satan that you run.” The United Methodist Church’s Social Principles say that we recognize racism as sin and affirm the ultimate and temporal worth of all persons. As our country continues to confront racism in many subtle and overt ways, may we, as United Methodists show up and pay attention, even when it is difficult. Rev. Bonner’s presence and attention to questions surrounding this case is helping others pay attention. May we continue to pray and look for opportunities to be about racial reconciliation in our town and nation.

Proverbs 4:25 encourages us to **fix our gaze** on what lies ahead. Who and what gets your full attention? Where do you fix your gaze right now?

As a church, we also discern what to give our full attention to. Do you think churches can get distracted? Definitely. We’re a group of different people with different passions and gifts. It’s easy for many churches to end up with so many different projects and activities that they can’t keep track of them. They’re all making a good difference in the world. But the question should be asked at every church: What could God do through us if 200 people focused on the same thing?!? Or prayerfully discerned 4-5 things to be about? **Collective focus is powerful.** The moment a faith community decides to give their full attention to a

situation of injustice, inequality, or pain in our world, that's a church ready for God to work some miracles.

Many of you have likely heard of Imagine No Malaria, an effort within the United Methodist Church to partner with the World Health Organization and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to eradicate malaria in sub-saharan Africa. Each church in the Greater Northwest Episcopal Area has been invited to consider a three year goal in this effort. The last church I served discerned a \$45,000 goal over 3 years. They had raised \$22,000 for Nothing But Nets a while back and thought they could do more. We started the ball rolling and money started to come in. We were excited to be part of an effort that could actually bring a frustrating disease to an end. Scientists tell us it's entirely possible to end malaria in our lifetime. Christmas was approaching and our senior pastor suggested we give our entire Christmas Eve offering to Imagine No Malaria. All of it - not part of it. Nothing was going to fund the budget or pay staff salaries. That was a fun finance meeting! The team talked and prayed and decided to go for it. So this past Christmas, we invited our guests and regular attenders to give a special gift to Imagine No Malaria. In past years, we'd usually received a \$10,000 offering on Christmas. Because we all chose to focus on one big crazy vision, guess how much came in that night? \$24,439. We heard from first time guests that it meant a lot to see a church give away the entire offering. It made them want to be a part of a church with that much faith and desire to change the world.

When a group of people take their hearts, minds and energy and point them in one direction, they can change the world for someone.

Psalm 111 encourages us to give thanks to our God with our **whole heart**. Not a sliver of our heart, or half our heart, or even 3/4's of our heart. God wants all of us. Our energy, our mistakes, our regrets, our brain, our soul and our attention. And does God need you to be ready before you give your whole heart? No. You'll never be ready. Because it doesn't make much sense that you would give your heart to a being you can't see, touch or prove. However, once you make that first step

of faith that maybe, just maybe God is a presence in our world and wants to be a part of our lives, you'll likely discover that it's not as scary as it seems to feel unprepared. It's okay to open yourself up to be loved by God in a way that people aren't able to.

What about paying attention when life is hard? It's easier to do when things are joyful and easy. But it's even more important that we pay attention when the world is hard and it makes us cry and breaks our hearts. Because Jesus needs us to stay awake! The awful things in life make us want to run, hide and avoid paying attention at all, but that is exactly when Jesus needs the church to be fiercely present!

**[PP SLIDE]** So the question for you this week is this: **Are you awake or asleep?** It's not a one time question by the way. This is a moment by moment question. You stop at work and wonder, "Am I awake and paying attention to these opportunities to lead and grow?" You pause while caring for children and ask, "Do they have my full attention or am I just trying to get through this?" You glance at the news and are tempted to turn it off, because you feel overwhelmed at the pain in the world. "Am I willing to pay attention to this and be a part of healing and reconciliation or will I avert my eyes because I just can't deal with this?"

"Stay awake" is the last thing Jesus says to the apostles as well in the garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26:38-45). He keeps finding them asleep. It's not that we do not want to be awake, but very few teachers have actually told us how to do that in a very practical way (Richard Rohr). We call it the teaching of contemplation and my friends, this is what we're learning together in this series. When our beliefs about Christ fully affect how we live, then the possibilities of what God could do through this church are limitless! Our work together continues. Amen.