

Sara Anne Berger, First Presbyterian Church, Natchitoches, Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10, Psalm 19, I Corinthians 12:12-31a, Luke 4:14-21

Sermon Resources:

<https://readalittlepoetry.wordpress.com/2014/09/10/sometimes-by-mary-oliver/>

[https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2047-choosing-epiphany?](https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2047-choosing-epiphany?fbclid=IwAR0u070ZB2GKUCpmmI_0h05Jj4SobInjwk5fmRArBbPcQAclaeVHpO8210M)

[fbclid=IwAR0u070ZB2GKUCpmmI_0h05Jj4SobInjwk5fmRArBbPcQAclaeVHpO8210M](https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2047-choosing-epiphany?fbclid=IwAR0u070ZB2GKUCpmmI_0h05Jj4SobInjwk5fmRArBbPcQAclaeVHpO8210M)

Shauna Niequist, “Bittersweet”

<https://churchintheworld.com/2016/01/17/reclaiming-the-joy-of-the-lord/>

<https://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/53382.pdf>

<http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/01/handed-over-and-given-back.html>

Two weeks ago, we lost the poet, Mary Oliver, whose poems and words have inspired and touched so many people. Her death is a great loss, but thankfully we still have her beautiful words and powerful poetry to inspire us, even as she is no longer with us. The scripture readings this week reminded me of one of her poems, “Sometimes”, which includes these lines:

“Instructions for living a life:

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.”

The instructions for living a life: pay attention, be astonished, tell about it. But we start by paying attention.

In our scriptures today, we have examples of paying attention. In Nehemiah it says all the men and women listening to Ezra read the book of law of God, that their ears were attentive, and that the key was for them to hear with understanding.

In Luke, it says that when Jesus unrolls the scroll in the synagogue, that all eyes were fixed on him, and then he tells them that the scripture has been fulfilled “in your hearing”. In short, the people listening to Ezra and Jesus were paying attention, with their ears, their eyes, their understanding.

And they are paying attention to Ezra reading the book of the law of the Lord, and Jesus reading the selection from Isaiah. But they’re also paying attention to what those texts and those people tell them, what deeper meaning they have for each person’s life. They’re paying attention to the ways they have failed to keep and know the law of the Lord, they’re paying attention to what will be required of them by the Spirit of the Lord. They’re paying attention something greater than their individual lives, something deeper than you would get from half-listening and half-watching and not paying attention. They’re paying attention to what will give them strength: the joy of the Lord; to what will drive them: the purpose and call of the Spirit.

What these two scriptures show us is that there are two sides: on the one hand, Ezra and the other priests and scribes are careful to read with interpretation and give sense to the reading, so the people can understand. When the people weep and mourn over their failings and failures, over the brokenness of their nation, Ezra makes sure to remind them of the joy, of what should be driving them and strengthening them from now on. So the one side is the explaining and showing.

But the other side is the people’s responsibility—the responsibility, as Mary Oliver says, to pay attention. Ezra and the scribes could have read and interpreted all the live long day, but if the people hadn’t come with attentive ears, if they hadn’t sought to understand, it would’ve come to nothing. Jesus could have taught in the synagogue and read until he was blue in the face, but unless the people took responsibility to fix their eyes on him, unless they heard so that the scripture could be fulfilled in their hearing, it wouldn’t have mattered. Part of the responsibility is

ours, the responsibility to try, to make an effort, to fix our eyes and open our ears, to seek understanding, to listen for deeper meaning, to pay attention.

And the texts tell us that our efforts to pay attention reap great reward for us. The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul, the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes. Revival of our souls, wisdom, rejoicing in our hearts, enlightening of our eyes, what wonderful benefits to paying attention to God's word, God's law. The very heavens are declaring the glory of God, if only we would make the effort to pay attention, the firmament would show us God's very handiwork, if only we would notice. We'd get to see God's glory, God's handiwork, if we take responsibility to pay attention.

Ezra tells the people, as they rightly recognize the ways they have not carried out God's instructions, that their nation is broken, their sins laid bare, he says that is not all, though. In the same way that we don't simply end with a confession, but go on to an assurance of pardon, Ezra says remember, the joy of the Lord is your strength. But if they hadn't been paying attention, hadn't been listening or trying to understand, they might not have realized. And then, what would be driving them, what they would be depending on for strength, would be very different than the Lord's joy.

And in Luke, Jesus lays out for those people whose eyes and ears are fixed on him, what the Spirit of the Lord will enable, what he has come here to do, what they'll be joining in, if they follow him: binding up the brokenhearted, healing and setting free, proclaiming good news to the poor. If they hadn't been paying attention, if they hadn't heard or watched him, they might not know the greater purpose, the call on their lives.

Taking responsibility to pay attention, making an effort to watch and listen and understand helps us realize something deeper and greater about our lives, helps

us recognize the Lord's handiwork and glory, strengthens us with God's joy, instead of our own efforts, it revives us and gives us wisdom; and it leads us to serve others better, because now we know what we are called to do for them.

But, even in the church, we don't always pay attention. Frankly, sometimes we don't come with our eyes ready to see, our ears ready to hear, our minds ready to understand. Sometimes we expect others to *get* our attention, but think we ought not have to pay attention. We put the onus on them. Frankly, sometimes we are figuratively sitting with our arms crossed like "impress me, see if you can catch my eye, if you can hold my attention". We expect other people to break through our inattention, without any effort on our part. We forget that there are two sides, and one of those sides is our responsibility to pay attention, to fix our eyes and hear and seek to understand.

Or, sometimes we're paying attention, but not to the best things. Not to the heavens, or the firmament, not to the law of the Lord or God's word. Not to what the Spirit of God has anointed, not to Jesus and what he said. Not to the body of Christ and the variety of members, not to the teaching and gifts and the joys and suffering around us. Instead we're paying attention to the biggest, loudest voices, the things that easily catch our eyes, the things we don't have to work too hard to understand, that we don't have to make any effort for. We pay attention to that which consumes more and more of our energy and our time, that which stirs up our panic and fear, stokes our anxiety and resentment.

And then we wonder why we never encounter God's glory, why our souls feel unrevived, why we feel separate from the body of Christ, why it feels like we have to do and be everything, why it feels like we have to run and run and run and never catch up, why it feels like we are being driven by something relentless, why our strength is all on us and so close to failing. We wonder why our service feels anxious, and our mission feels like desperation. But we haven't paid attention or

we've set our attention on that which will not make us strong in the Lord's joy, or lead us to serve in the Spirit of the Lord.

Particularly when we are paying attention to those fear-inducing, anxiety-inducing, panic-inducing things, those things that tell us we've got to be afraid, we've got to fix this right this second, we've got to do everything, there aren't any eyes or feet or hands, so we've got to be all the parts, it's all down to us and oh, also we need to build up our own strength, and revive our own hearts, and we are being driven by those kinds of things, we will burn out. We won't be able to proclaim good news to the poor, or help release the captives. We won't be able to feed the hungry or work for the greater good. We'll be frantic and half-aware and running on fear and anxiety, and we won't be much use to anyone.

And that kind of attention, the lack of attention to the greater power of God, the deeper calling of our lives, and the attention we pay to things which take our strength rather than revive us, also means that we aren't paying attention to the other parts of the body of Christ. We aren't paying attention to the wonderful gifts other people have to offer, we pay no attention to the other ways people are helping or lifting burdens. We miss the value that the so-called "lesser" parts have to offer. We miss the chance to mourn with those who are mourning, and rejoice with those who are rejoicing, and we lose the connections who would support us in our times of sorrow and success.

Ezra says to the people that the joy of the Lord is your strength. Not your can-do attitude, not your response to every crisis, not your fear and panic, not the frantic need to be all things to all people. The joy of the Lord is your strength. When we've set our attention on not-so-good things, none of that comes from the Lord's joy. And it means instead of proclaiming good news, and setting the captive free, and engaging in the healing this world desperately needs, instead we're just

spilling our anxiety out everywhere onto everyone, and not paying any attention to what we're causing.

So we need to pay attention, and we need to pay attention to the best things, the joy of the Lord, the law and word of the Lord, the spirit's anointing, the gifts we've all been given, the body of Christ, the teaching of Jesus, the glory and handiwork written in the heavens.

The flip side of this is that in our responsibility to pay attention, we have to realize that we can't pay attention to everything equally or well. Shauna Niequist, a writer, talks about a conversation she had with one of her spiritual mentors, someone she desperately wanted to emulate, and asked her what's the secret, how do you do it all? And her mentor said the secret is that I don't do it all, I choose things that I am not going to do, no matter how good or wonderful they are for somebody else. And she says "It's not hard figuring out what your life is supposed to be about. What's hard is figuring out what you're not going to do in order to make that happen". Whereupon, Shauna precedes to write a "things I don't do list", to remind herself in those times when she thinks she can and ought to do everything.

The same is true of paying attention. Not everything can have equal attention, and the more we give our attention to one thing the less attention we can give to another. We have to choose what is not going to receive as much attention, where our focus is not going to be as much, in order to take on our responsibility of paying attention in the best ways, to the greater and deeper things of our lives.

And we will have to choose, we will have to make the effort to pay attention to the word of God and the teachings of Jesus christ, to the nudging of the Spirit, and the other members of the body, we will have to make the effort to pay attention to those things with fixed eyes and open ears and a desire to understand, and that will mean that our attention has to be less focused in other places.

And that's not really fun. Deep down we don't really want to have to make the choice, we want someone else to do it, or we want it to be so easy that we don't have to. Writer Debie Thomas said in her reflections on the season of Epiphany: "Here's my real problem with this liturgical season: I always, always have a choice — and most of the time, I don't want it. I expect God's revelations to bowl me over. I expect epiphany to come in ways that leave me choice-less, powerless, and flattened in awe. I want a divine encounter that will free me of all doubts for all time, so that I literally pulse with faith." We'd love the firmaments to be SCREAMING God's handiwork, the heavens to unquestionably be declaring the glory of God, for the law of the Lord and the word of God to be so loud that we couldn't ignore them, for Jesus' teaching to be fulfilled in ways that left us without any doubt, for the Spirit to have made us all so similar that we wouldn't have any conflict or disagreement among us, for us to easily and effortlessly be filled with the joy of the Lord.

It doesn't work that way. Part of our responsibility is to pay attention, and to pay attention we have to choose what we not pay attention to, or what we will pay less attention to, and that means even some really good things, too, but maybe not the best things, or the right things for us, our part of the body of Christ; we'll have to choose, and then choose to pay attention with fixed eyes and open ears and seeking minds to the greater purpose and deeper call of our lives.

So consider in our own lives, in our relationships with each other here, and out in the world, in our jobs, with our neighbors and friends, do we come with eagerness, with listening ears, with watchful eyes, do we seek to understand, are we paying attention? In terms of scripture, the law of the Lord, the word of the Lord, the teachings of Jesus and the movement of the Spirit, do we have listening ears, do we have watchful eyes, are we seeking to understand, are we paying attention? In the midst of the world today, in the news and in the mess and in the panic and

fear, are we making sure to also pay attention to our greater strength, our deeper call, are we looking for the Lord's handiwork and glory, are we looking to the joy of the Lord for our strength? Are those the things we're paying the most attention to? Or are we paying the most attention to those things which induce panic and anxiety?

This matters not only because it is part of our responsibility, but also because our lives are not easy. We carry into this place our worries, the things we can't do anything about. We go out of this place to, perhaps, difficult jobs, jobs we don't love, maybe we have responsibilities in our lives which are burdensome, maybe we are suffering from sickness or pain, from mental illness, spiritual difficulties, maybe we have people in our lives that we have to take care of, and no matter the relationship, that is a lot of responsibility, maybe we are watching the world and panicking, spiraling, full of anxiety that we want to pour out somewhere. Those things don't go away just because the firmaments declare the glory of God. But those worries, burdens, the feeling of lack, the feeling of relentlessness, the feeling of fear and panic and anxiety, that can't be what drives our lives, what dictates all of our attention, it can't be what we rely on for strength. So, we will need something else, something more, something to strengthen us and revive us and guide us, to carry us through all of that. So it matters where we choose to put the rest of our attention, it matters what we listen and watch for, what we seek to understand. It matters that we spend some of our attention on the law of the Lord, which revives us, and the teachings of Jesus which are fulfilled in our hearing, and the movement of the Spirit which gives us gifts, and the body of Christ which gives us community, and the joy of the Lord which gives us strength.

Then we'll be better able to speak good news, we'll be better able to set the captives free, to help bring about healing of the brokenhearted and wounded. We'll be able to value each other's gifts, and depend on each other, and mourn with each

other and celebrate with each other. We'll stop pouring our anxiety on each other, and instead we'll pour joy and good news and strength on each other.

A few weeks ago we got star words in worship, and we were asked what those words might reveal to us and in us, how they might draw our gaze above to what God is revealing this year. The next week we talked about Jesus' baptism, and how we would be driven to act, if we knew, like we do in baptism, that we are truly loved by God? How would that drive us? And last week we talked about spiritual gifts and taking notice of those quieter, preparatory, behind the scenes gifts. What it comes down to is what are you paying attention to, and therefore, what is driving you, where is your strength coming from? This is a chance to reconsider, to re-evaluate. To choose, perhaps, to take our attention away from things that aren't serving us well, that are making us miss the glory and revival and joy of the Lord, and pay attention to those things which will revive our souls and show us the Spirit's leading, and help us put our gifts to better use, and follow Jesus Christ more closely? To choose to pay attention to the word of the Lord, to the teachings of our Savior, to the Spirit's gifts, to the joy of the Lord, which is our strength.

Let's pay attention. Let's pay attention to the best things. Let's choose to do so, let's choose to make the effort. Let's pay attention with listening ears and fixed eyes, and minds that seek to understand. Let's not only pay attention not to the loudest, the brightest, the most fearful, the most anxiety inducing things, alone. Let's also make sure to take time to pay attention to the firmament, the heavens, the law of the Lord, the word of God, the spirit's gifts, the body of Christ, the good teachings of Jesus Christ. Let's pay attention to that which will show us the joy of the Lord, which will revive our hearts, which will give us understanding. Let's pay attention to that which will drive us to speak good news and set people free and bring about healing and help for this world. Let's pay attention to that which will encourage us to be one part of many, to value each other, to celebrate and mourn

together as a body of Christ. Let's make the choice, let's be made strong in the Lord's joy, and let's follow the wise instructions for living a life: pay attention, be astonished, tell about it. But first, let's pay attention. Amen.