

“Selective Attention”

Luke 15:1-10

Life is always coming at us.

The honk of a car horn from the street outside. A ray of sunlight coming through the window. The smell of perfume in the air. A pinch in the toe from new shoes that are a little too tight. The taste of a cough drop in your mouth.

Each of us receives a continuous barrage of sensory information. It comes to us through hearing, sight, smell, touch and taste.

Most the time, we don't pay attention to every one of these sensory experiences. If we did, we'd be constantly distracted. “Instead,” says an educational consultant named Kendra Cherry, “we center our attention on certain important elements of our environment.” Other things blend into the background or slip by us unnoticed. So, how do we decide what to focus on and what to ignore?

“Imagine that you are at a party for a friend hosted at a bustling restaurant,” says Cherry. “Multiple conversations, the clinking of plates and forks, and many other sounds compete for your attention. Out of all these noises, you find yourself able to tune out the irrelevant sounds and focus on the amusing story that your dining partner shares.”

That's amazing, isn't it? You can focus on what your partner is saying, even though the restaurant is full of distracting sounds and smells and sights. Although as I age, I'm finding it more and more difficult to hear a person when there is a lot of background noise.

This ability to focus on just one aspect of your environment is called “selective attention.”

Preachers want you to practice it every Sunday in church, when you concentrate on the sermon instead of a whole range of distractions. My wife wants me to practice it every time she's speaking to me.

Of course, selective attention is not always needed. Twenty-one years ago today, our attention was riveted on television images of the Twin Towers in New York City, burning and collapsing after being attacked by terrorists. We did not have to be told to concentrate on these images. It was impossible to look at anything else.

But most of the time, we must be selective about the things that we focus on. "In order to sustain our attention to one event in everyday life, we must filter out other events," says author Russell Revlin in his book, *Cognition: Theory and Practice*. "We must be selective in our attention by focusing on some events to the detriment of others. This is because attention is a resource that needs to be distributed to those events that are important."

Researchers believe that we can practice selective attention with our eyes and our ears. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus tells parables in which a man and a woman practice selective attention in the search for a lost sheep and a lost coin. They use both the *spotlight model* and the *zoom-lens model*.

In the spotlight model, visual attention is like a spotlight that enables things to be seen clearly within the center of a small area. Around the focal point of the beam is the fringe, where things are still visible, but not very clear. Outside the fringe is the margin, where very little is seen.

The woman with the lost coin uses the spotlight model. Jesus says that she has 10 silver coins, and when she loses one of them, she lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and searches

carefully until she finds it. She shines her spotlight into every dark corner of the house, ignoring things that are in the fringe and the margin until the beam of the light reflects her coin. Then she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost” (Luke 15:9).

In the zoom in, zoom out model, visual attention is more like the zoom-lens of a camera. We can increase or decrease the size of our focus. We can zoom in close on an item of interest, but, of course, this means that we lose sight of those things that are outside of our focus area. If we go the other direction and zoom out, we can see a larger area but run the risk of losing focus on small, individual items.

The man with the lost sheep uses the zoom-lens model. Most days, he zooms out so that he can keep an eye on his 100 sheep, but when one sheep becomes lost, he zooms in on that particular sheep until he finds it. “When he has found it,” says Jesus, “he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices” (v. 5).

There is a problem with this zoom-lens approach. When the man zooms in on the lost sheep, he loses sight of the 99 sheep outside the focus area. And you can imagine that when he throws a party for his friends and neighbors, rejoicing in the finding of the lost sheep, some of them might ask, “Why didn’t you keep your focus on the 99?”

Good question. Watching over 99 sheep seems to be much more sensible than zooming in on one.

But this is not the approach of Jesus, who wants his followers to practice selective attention. “I tell you,” says Jesus, “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (v. 7).

Which Method Should We Use?

Jesus is all about the spotlight and the zoom lens. He puts his attention on tax collectors and sinners, even though the Pharisees and scribes grumble and complain that he welcomes sinners and eats with them (vv. 1-2). “Just so, I tell you,” Jesus says, “there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (v. 10).

One sinner. One coin. One sheep. Put the spotlight on the one coin, says Jesus, not the nine. Zoom in on the one sheep, not the 99. Such attention might not seem sensible, but it is central to the ministry and mission of Jesus.

So, what would it mean for us to practice this kind of selective attention?

We begin by letting go of the bitterness that arises whenever we feel that God is focusing more on others than on us. This was the reason for the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes, who were upset that Jesus was welcoming tax collectors and sinners and eating with them. “Typically, we want mercy for ourselves and justice for others,” says New Testament scholar R. Alan Culpepper, but these “parables call for us to celebrate with God because God has been merciful not only to us but to others also.”

We must admit that we want God’s zoom-lens on us, not on the lost sheep. We like to have God’s spotlight on us, instead of on some lost coin in the dark corner of the room. But God’s selective attention is always on those who are lost, rather than those who are found. Our challenge is to rejoice with Jesus, whenever a sheep is restored to the fold.

We should be thankful that God’s mercy has been extended to us as well. After all, every one of us is a recipient of God’s unconditional love and unlimited grace. “I once was lost, but now am found,” says the hymn *Amazing Grace*, “was blind, but now I see.”

After letting go of our bitterness, we can join Jesus in his ongoing search, using the spotlights and zoom-lenses available to us.

We can put a spotlight on our children coming back to Sunday school today and their Sunday school teachers teaching them Bible stories like these parables of the lost sheep and lost coin.

We put a spotlight on this “God’s Work, Our Hands” Sunday as we gather after worship for lunch and to assemble school bags for Lutheran World Relief and students in need across the street at Parma Park.

We put a spotlight on the women and men of the church who will be here bright and early tomorrow morning to begin the nutroll season and funds that will be raised to pay for needed projects around the church like new carpeting.

We put a spotlight on 9/11 in remembrance of those who died that day. We put a spotlight on January 6; those who died in the only coup attempt in the history of the United States. In future American history books our descendants will read about terrorists who brought down the twin towers and domestic terrorists who tried to bring down our government with the support of the sitting president. We spotlight these days, to learn from our mistakes and to honor those who died.

At the same time, we can use a zoom lens to focus on adults who are struggling to find their place in the church after pursuing their careers and raising families. Yes, there is certainly a need to shine a light on all the adults of the church, but we need to zoom in on those who begin to drift after their children have grown up and moved away. This is a time when careers can hit a plateau and marriages can come apart.

Both men and women wonder what their purpose is, and what their involvement in the church should look like. By zooming in on this stage of life, the church can help people with the challenge of turning around, turning back to God — again, what the Bible calls “repentance.”

Jesus wants us to love everyone, just as he does. But at the same, time, he challenges us to focus our selective attention on the lost coin, not the nine that are still in hand. He pushes us to go looking for the lost sheep that is wandering around, not the 99 that are safe in the flock. When we do this, we become part of a heavenly party in which everyone can rejoice and celebrate together.

May the peace of God . . .

#772 – Oh, That the Lord Would Guide My Ways