

## “Focus”

I’ve waited thirty-one years to work this into a sermon. In 1978, in Chadron, Nebraska, I heard a woman named Calista Olds preach a sermon in which she told the story of a woman who unleashed upon the world a triple pun. Living way out there in the Sand Hills of Nebraska, this woman inherited a ranch which her two sons ran for her. She named the ranch “Focus”. Get it? Neither did I. I didn’t say it was *worth* waiting thirty-one years to work that into a sermon.

Does the name Aron Ralston mean anything to you? No, he’s not the Associate Minister who left here for Illinois in June. That’s Aaron James. Aron Ralston was in the news for a brief but intense period in May of 2003. No? Anybody? Buehler?

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to drop a watermelon out of a helicopter onto an empty parking lot?

This week a group of car makers came out in favor of a national ban on text-messaging while driving. Text-messaging slows reaction time even more than being legally drunk. “DWD” is the new designation for “driving while distracted.” It can have dire consequences.

This apparently random collection of items seems a fitting way to ease us into a scripture lesson that appears to be a random collection of items.

Our lesson for today picks up immediately where we left off last week, a lesson in which Jesus teaches the disciples that following Jesus is an invitation to a world of welcome in which people invisible in society—like children in the ancient world—are actually the key to seeing the presence and activity of God. To notice and welcome a little child is to welcome and notice Jesus, and therefore God.

This week Jesus and the disciples are still at home in Capernaum on the shores lake Galilee, where they have returned from a retreat some distance to the north. It’s still just Jesus and the disciples: one final time alone before he re-engages the crowds and begins the journey to Jerusalem, where he will suffer and die. This is Jesus’ last opportunity in Galilee to get across to his inner circle what it means to follow him.

What comes out is a seemingly unrelated list of topics. First John says, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” An outsider is drawing on Jesus’ power and authority to exorcise unclean spirits. How does one deal with somebody who hangs out a shingle and claims to be a preacher? There ought to be a law! But Jesus is not upset. Let it go, he counsels. How could anybody who does good in my name think ill of me? “Whoever is not against us is for us.” The disciples are worried somehow about the purity of the movement. (Or perhaps they are still worried about their own position and wanting to preserve their spot close to Jesus.) “That’s not where your energy belongs,” he seems to be telling them. Assume the best and move on. Any act of kindness associated with the movement is worthy of praise and reward.

Abruptly he seems to change the subject. “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.” That’s pretty graphic!

When we hear “little ones” we’re tempted to think again of children. But in this case the “little ones” Jesus refers to are more likely proselytes, newcomers to the faith. If the disciples want to be thinking about who’s in and who’s out, they would do better to direct their attention to the little ones who have just joined the flock. Their newfound faith is precarious, particularly if someone causes them to stumble.

That’s an interesting image, as though they are all part of a parade and somebody toward the front stumbles, causing the whole entourage to go down. The Greek word for “stumble” is the source of our English word, “scandal”. Think of how many times the leaders of movements have been involved in scandal that causes those behind them to stumble. When that happens, the whole enterprise is sunk... like swimming with a millstone for a life preserver.

So the teaching moves along to things that cause us to stumble and create stumbling blocks for those behind us. It’s a strange list that Jesus offers: “If your hand causes you to stumble... if your foot causes you to stumble... if your eye causes you to stumble...” And the language is very harsh: cut it off (or pluck it out)! There’s a grim image. And then this: “... it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands [or feet or eyes] and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.”

Hell? We don't talk about that very much. Let's start with that. The Greek word is Gehenna, and it is a proper noun denoting a specific place, the Hinnom Valley which is just outside the city walls of Jerusalem. In the period before Jerusalem became the capitol of Israel, this valley was associated with human sacrifice—sort of like New Jersey. So Gehenna becomes a fitting symbol for evil. In Jesus' day Gehenna—the Hinnom Valley—had become a garbage dump for the city, a place where quite literally “their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched.” The three-story universe concept in which there's a heaven “up there” and a hell “down there” and you go to one of them after you die came along only much later, and really clouds our reading of this passage. As it reads it really says nothing about eternal punishment. It contrasts life—in this case life as a follower of Jesus—with a path that causes you to end up on the garbage dump. The message is that you can be so concerned with remaining intact that lose sight of real life, your true reason for being. Nothing is worth missing out on life. It's like being so worried you'll scratch a fender that you drive off a cliff.

So whatever causes you to miss the point, to distract you from your true purpose—even something that seems eminently desirable in the eyes of the world—you're better off without it. This is not a call for self-mutilation. Hands, feet and eyes are good things, as are things like bank accounts, jobs and church. But any of this, if it gets in the way of our relationship with God and our central purpose of loving God and neighbor—we're better off without... even church.

Notice the clear echo here of an earlier teaching: “For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” To have everything and lose your true self, your deepest, truest life in God, your soul, your central reason for being, is to end up nowhere. It's to end up on the smoldering, festering dump... and then where are you?

To have everything and end up nowhere is like being salt that has lost its saltiness. This was a great image in the ancient world. Salt was a very valuable commodity, good for seasoning food and essential for preserving it in a world where there was no refrigeration. Salt was so precious that Roman soldiers were sometimes paid in salt. The word “salary” comes from the word for salt. We still speak of a worker as being worth his or her salt. But salt that's not salty is just powder. “Don't lose your saltiness,” Jesus is saying, “your spark, your spiritedness, your connection to God.” Without it, you're nothing at all. And, by the way, “be at peace with one another.” Keep

your pizzazz, but save your energy for what matters. Let's worry less about who's with us and more about where we're going.

There is a clear theme here, after all: don't lose your focus. Don't forget that you're here to love God and neighbor. Don't get distracted by a million and one things—even good things—and careen off the road. Like texting while you're driving, that is cruisin' for a bruise. What is there that is so vital about that message that you'd trade your life for it, and maybe take some other people out right along with you?

Jesus is talking about genuine sacrifice that can lead to real life; and that language really isn't as hard for us to relate to as we think.

Aron Ralston is a rock climber, world class. In 2003 he was climbing in a canyon in Utah when he accidentally dislodged a boulder that rolled over and pinned his right arm in a crevice. He was in a very remote area. He waited three days and nights for the possibility of rescue. When he had consumed the last of his water he did what he had to do: he took the only implement he had, a three-inch penknife, and he used it to amputate the trapped limb. Do you remember hearing that story? That was a terrible sacrifice. But nobody would accuse him of having his priorities out of whack. Not very many people could do what he did; but we admire him for it.

What if by sacrificing a hand, a foot or an eye we could save somebody else's life? Most of us could see the point of that. Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of God—not pie in the sky by and by but life lived with a full awareness of God's presence and power—is so surpassingly wonderful that it is worth surrendering anything that interferes... even good things.

What does a watermelon look like when it's dropped on a parking lot from a helicopter? It looks like a life that has lost its focus. It looks like a life devoted to chasing around after anything and everything: make a lot of money, climb the corporate ladder, get the kids into Harvard... and then what? Nobody ever said on their death bed, "I wish I'd spent more time at work." They might say something like, "I wish I'd used the good dishes more often," because good dishes should be used for special occasions, and how sad is it when special occasions seem few and far between?

Keep your focus, grow in love of God and neighbor, celebrate the goodness of God, pass the salt. Some people think a little salt is great on watermelon; better to eat them than throw them out of helicopters, anyway.

Jesus' invitation to discipleship is a challenge to focus, to prioritize. His summons to clarity of purpose points us toward disciplined discipleship—see how similar those words are? It is a call to find life that is surpassingly wonderful because God is at the center of it.

That woman near Chadron, Nebraska called her ranch Focus because that's where her sons raise meat. Focus is also where the sun's rays meet.

Focus: don't miss out on life. Stay salty.

Amen

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