

Heart Matters

John 4:5-42

Third Sunday of Lent, (March 13) 2022

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It's been a couple of years since I've been at the Neighborhood. For those of you who don't know, the Neighborhood is five of us, used to be six of us, who are or were pastors and who are close friends who spend most of a week together twice a year. Or at least, we did do that – for 30 years.

Things change. Covid came along and now we meet weekly by Zoom. Ray Vickrey, died about a year and a half ago. Three of us are retired with only Charlie Johnson and me still working full-time.

Friends, colleagues, and church members used to be curious about what we did each week we were together. Some people seemed to believe that we partied and back when we were young, we sort of left that hanging in the air. But the truth then, and even more so in recent years, is our definition of partying has always been pretty tame. We'd take a day for our rhythms to slow down from the frantic speed of our normal routines, arriving at a ranch house one of our extended families owned out near Abilene, or a cabin that we would rent in Central Texas. We usually went to bed by 10:00 on most nights and would take naps during the afternoon because catching up on sleep was a priority. Most of our days were filled with conversation – and we'd go for walks, pray, work on sermon ideas, read, cook, eat healthy meals, and maybe watch a movie, but most of our time was spent in long conversations on the porch or in the house. When in the house, we had to

reorient the furniture so we could face one another when we talked. It is interesting that most living rooms or dens are oriented around the TV, not for conversation. One of the last things we would always need to do before leaving wherever we stayed, would be to move everything back to where it was before – around the TV.

The Neighborhood is what philosopher Albert Borgmann calls a focal practice. Borgmann says that a focal practice is one that orients or centers your life. The Neighborhood re-centers me on what is most important, what is essential, what is most meaningful. A focal practice, a focal object, a focal event, or focal place is whatever helps us pay attention to God, recentering ourselves, each other and creation. For you it might be walking, riding a bicycle, running, gardening, quilting, meditation, reading, writing, sawing wood, painting, or preparing and sharing meals with friends and/or family, or any number of other practices. For me, it is usually sitting on the porch with a pile of books. For my friend Joe, for example, it is working on a building project, refinishing a piece of furniture, cleaning out old boxes, and such.

A focal practice is more than a hobby. And it cannot be anything that distracts from what is most essential in knowing God, or knowing others, or knowing ourselves, or nature. It orients us rather than disorients us. It integrates us rather than disintegrates us.

We get the word “focal” from focus and from hearth. The hearth was typically at the center of a home—the Latin for hearth is focus—and, true to its Latin name, the hearth was the center of various household activities. Also related to the word hearth is heart. The hearth was the heart of the home.

Which raises the question: what's the heart of your home today? What's the focal point, the center of your house, your family life? The TV? The computer? The kitchen? The porch? The den? And further, what are the focal places of Nacogdoches? What's the heart of our community? Where are the places around here that helps us reorient? Reintegrates us?

In the ancient and medieval world, wells and fountains were the focal point. Life in the village revolved around the well.

Richard Sclove writes about the studies done on one Spanish village when it received running water to replace the village well or fountain that was at the center of the town:

With pipes running directly to their homes, [villagers] no longer had to fetch water from the ... fountain. As families gradually purchased washing machines, fewer women gathered to scrub laundry by hand at the village washbasin. Arduous tasks were rendered ... superfluous, but village social life unexpectedly changed. The public fountain or washbasin, once scene of vigorous social interaction, became nearly deserted. Men began losing their sense of easy familiarity with children and donkeys that formerly helped them haul water. Women stopped gathering ... to intermix scrubbing with politically empowering gossip about men and village life. In hindsight this emerges as a crucial step in a broader process through which [villagers] came to relinquish strong bonds – with one another, animals, and the land – that had knit them into a community. Furthermore, this added incentive for also replacing donkeys with tractors for field work, which had

become the only task left for donkeys. But this also increased the villagers' dependence on outside jobs for the cash needed to finance and operate their new tractors and washing machines. (from Resisting the Virtual Life: The Culture and Politics of Information, pp. 86-90).

My point is not to bemoan the coming of running water but to point out the social role fountains or wells played in villages. How central it was to life. It was a focal point.

Sometime go through the Bible and look at all the stories that take place around wells. For examples, the crucial events in Hagar's life occur around a well in Gen. 16 and 21. Abraham's servants have conflict with another group over a well (Gen. 21). Couples meet around wells: for instance, Jacob meets Rachel (Gen. 29) and Moses meets Zipporah (Ex. 2) around wells.

There is a lot more going on at wells than just getting water. And in our Scripture lesson for today that is very much the case. We have this wonderful story in John 4, about Jesus and the woman at the well. Jesus is going through Samaria, unusual in and of itself, and stops in Sychar, at the village well, to rest and hopefully get a drink of water. It is the middle of the day, and this Samaritan woman shows up and she and Jesus have this long conversation (the longest dialogue in the gospels, in a book full of long dialogues). The conversation is interesting, almost humorous. There is much give and take; she asks questions, Jesus gives answers, but his answers are not what she was expecting. At the same time, she gives as good as she takes, persisting in her questions and dialogue, while wondering about this strange Jewish male, who is willing to talk to her in broad

daylight. In that day and culture, men did not even speak to their wives in public.

It is no accident that she is at the well during the middle of the day. Early in the morning and late in the evening, in the cool of the day was when the women of the village would come to draw water from the well. They would draw water and talk about this particular woman – which is why she is here, now. So Jesus, this Jewish male, obviously a rabbi, a teacher, is here talking to her but the more he talks the more confused she becomes. At the same time, she is not intimidated and keeps engaging him. She is drawn to this strange rabbi, and she finds herself being transformed. She is caught up in something deeper and greater than she's ever known before. She ends saying to herself and to her friends, "I have met a man who told me everything. He is not the Messiah, is he?"

This was what we might call a moment of grace, when everything comes together, where things are properly centered, where time stops and we are fully present. Abraham Maslow called them "peak experiences," and Virginia Woolf wrote of "moments of being."

Teacher and essayist David Weale, asks these questions to help us pay attention to such occurrences:

Have you ever been swept away by a song or piece of music? Have you stood at night and gazed upon the stars, and experienced a mysterious connection with objects millions of light years away? Have you ever been "in the zone" while participating in a sport which took you beyond your ordinary level of awareness and competency? Have you ever experienced such a deep solidarity with other

members of a choir or team or audience that individual identities dissolved into a single identity? Have you ever become so absorbed in a task or hobby that time disappeared? Have you ever, during extremely difficult or sorrowful times, been filled suddenly with the deep certainty that everything was going to be fine? Or have you ever had your hearts momentarily melted by an unexpected gesture of compassion? (from Chasing the Shore: Little Stories About Spirit and Landscape, p. 30).

These are also called “unitive experiences,” where we feel at one with God, with oneself, with others, and with the wider world. Or a “kairos moment” where time seems to stop for us at this one experience.

This Samaritan woman comes to the well, and even though she is marginalized in the village, the well is still a focal place for her. It is a central place for her life. Focal places and focal experiences do not mean that every day we go to that place or gaze upon that focal object that we’ll have a transforming experience like she did. It means that at those times or places of re-centering, we become open to receiving what God might have for us. It is at these focal places and times we learn to pay attention, to slow down enough that something or someone might catch us unaware, and then unexpectedly, we end up being changed.

Quaker Douglas Steere said that prayer is “to pay attention to the deepest things you know.” All faiths ask questions about paying attention. Where do you look with your eyes, listen with your ears, focus with your minds and imaginations? Where do you invest yourself and your time? Where we pay

attention; where we center our lives shapes us. Eastern Christianity has long known that what we gaze upon in turn, changes us. That's why praying and gazing upon icons is so central to their spirituality.

And it is also why what is central in our lives, what is central in our homes, and in our families is so important. It makes a difference if the center of our lives is technology: TV's, computer screens, cell phones, and on and on or if what is center helps us know God, know each other, and know ourselves. I'm not suggesting that technology is evil. I'm saying that it gets in the way; it clutters and distracts us so we become people who are unable to gaze, to pay attention to anything of substance for more than a few minutes. We become disintegrated rather than integrated.

More and more, it seems that we live in an entire culture of disintegration and society-wide attention deficit disorders. Our lives are increasingly fragmented and frantic and while technology might not be the cause, it certainly reinforces it; it misdirects and malforms our attention. And we end up adding to the disintegration around us.

David Kline, a wonderfully elegant writer about nature, who is also an Amish farmer in central Ohio, tells of a busload of tourists coming through Amish country. The bus stops and an Amishman gets on to talk with the tourists. Someone asks, "Why are the Amish different from other Christians? You have the same DNA, you like to eat good food, and even though your clothes are different, you wear clothes like everyone else. So what makes you different?"

The Amishman says, “How many of you have a TV?” All passengers on the bus raise their hand.

“How many of you believe your children would be better off without TV?” Most everyone raise their hands.

“How many of you, knowing this, will get rid of your TV when you go home?” No hands were raised.

“That’s the difference between the Amish and everyone else,” he concluded.

Laity Lodge is a retreat center out near Kerrville, in the Hill Country, on the banks of the Frio River. I was out there several years ago and met Eric Brende, a brilliant and eccentric Christian young man who has a master’s degree in computer science from M.I.T. He and his family now live in St. Louis, where he renovates old houses and sells them. For extra cash, during baseball season he runs a rickshaw business. He picks up passengers at the downtown hotels and takes them to the ballpark to see the Cardinals and after the game, when traffic is at a standstill, he picks them up and weaves between the stuck cars, back to the hotel. He makes pretty good money.

I ask him why he lives differently. He said that after M.I.T. he spent two years living and working with the Amish. They taught him to live differently and taught him to ask questions.

He is eccentric. We usually think of eccentric as meaning quirky or odd, but

the word comes from the Latin *eccentricus*, meaning “having a different center.” This morning I invite us to have a different center. During Lent we are invited to participate in small groups, focal groups. We’re reading Miroslav Volf’s *Free of Charge*, but the book and the groups are intended as focal practices helping us reintegrate our lives, recenter ourselves in God.

We are already known as the oddball church in town, the eccentric church, so may our eccentricity be because we are centered in Jesus Christ. Not technology, not consumerism, not fear, not anger, not franticness, but in the deep, integrating center that God gives us in Christ.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.