

Perspectives and Reflections  
August 18, 2015

## *Attention*

Luke 19:1-8

*1 [Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through it.*

*2 A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich.*

*3 He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.*

*4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.*

*5 When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."*

*6 So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.*

*7 All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."*

*8 Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."*

I spent a lot of time last Spring thinking about attention.

2015 is the twentieth year of the ACTivators youth ministry program and we did a couple things last Spring to mark that milestone.

I ended up in one or two rooms where a lot of people were smiling and patting me on the back—which was kind of nice—but I know better than to think it was really about me. I was the one whose hand got shaken, but the attention was obviously meant for the hundreds of gifted and dedicated students who have done amazing things through that program over the last 20 years.

I tried hard to remember that it wasn't all about me. And my life is full of family members and colleagues who were diligent about being sure I never forgot that.

But it got me thinking about attention.

Then, on June 30, Linnea and I went to the Findley Theater to see a performance of *Les Misérables*.

As I'm sure most of you know, no town in the world with 40,000 or so residents has a better local theater than Sherman, Texas. And the production of *Les Mis* was predictably outstanding.

(I especially love *Les Mis* because it includes a rare favorable portrait of a Christian minister.)

There were Austin College fingerprints all over the production—alums and current students in the cast and in the orchestra and faculty members Kirk Everist and Wayne Crannell leading the entire enterprise.

It was great. But I didn't come here to talk about that.

On June 30, in the middle of the last musical number in the first act, a member of the audience had an epileptic seizure.

It was obviously a tense and stressful moment.

I found it interesting then, and even more interesting as I reflect on the evening.

First, I'll tell you that the patient was fine. An ambulance came, she was taken to the hospital and released later that evening.

But it was a fascinating experience for a preacher who had been thinking about attention.

By definition, we—the audience—were there to pay attention to the performers and the material. I don't want to push this too far, but we were kind of a community of attention.

We were obviously all facing the same way, seeing and hearing the same things. We knew what to expect, and we were getting what we anticipated.

And then our attention was interrupted.

Something completely unplanned and unexpected happened.

And everybody's attention changed.

The actor on stage stopped singing in the middle of the song. Kirk Everist delivered the most cliché line he'll ever utter on a stage: "Is there a doctor in the house?"

But it was exactly the right thing to say.

There were two people there who had medical training—a retired physician and a nurse practitioner. They came forward and attended to the young woman who had the seizure.

And the rest of us stayed in our seats; watching; ready to do anything we needed to do to help, but also concerned to stay out of the way of the professionals.

In a moment, our attention had shifted.

And everybody did well. Attention is interesting.

The story from Luke that Lauren just read to us is a story about attention.

Zacchaeus gets all different kinds of attention in the story. Any first century Jewish audience hearing this story would have known immediately that Zacchaeus was a jerk just by learning that Zacchaeus was "the chief tax collector" and "rich."

The way it worked in Palestine at that time was that the Romans identified people in the places they had conquered and made them tax collectors. They told those tax collectors, “you’re responsible for paying us a certain amount per capita in your area—but take as much as you can get, we’ll let you keep the difference and we’ll use our army to keep the people in line.”

Chief tax collectors got rich by taking more from the people than they owed to the Romans.

So a first century audience wouldn’t have been surprised at all in verse 3 when the crowd wouldn’t move over so the short guy could see, and they would have nodded their heads in agreement when the crowd grumbled in verse 6 that “Jesus has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.”

Zacchaeus got a lot of attention. But it wasn’t good attention.

But the reason people in my tribe love to remember and retell this story is because Jesus gives a different sort of attention to Zacchaeus.

Remember—in verse 4, after the crowd won’t move over so he can see what’s going on, Zacchaeus runs ahead and climbs a sycamore tree.

Then Luke 19:5 says,

*5When Jesus came to the place,  
he looked up and said to him,  
"Zacchaeus, hurry and come down;  
for I must stay at your house today."*

I think that, when we’re at our best at Austin College, we do the same three things for each and all of our students that Jesus does for Zacchaeus in that verse,

The first thing Jesus does is look up.

He wasn’t just trudging along, already thinking about what was next on his to-do list. If he hadn’t been paying attention to what was going on around him, this wouldn’t have ever been a story.

That’s what we do here.

It’s why we have Strategic Plans and Assessment Reports. It’s why we don’t do exactly the same things now that we did thirty-five years ago when I was a freshman here.

It’s why we won’t even do exactly the same things this year that we did last year.

We try to look up, look around, and pay *attention* to what’s going on.

The second thing Jesus does in Luke 19:5 is to call Zacchaeus by name.

The story gives us lots of categories that Zacchaeus fits into:

Rich tax collector

Short guy

Sinner

but Jesus is the only character in the story who calls Zacchaeus by name.

I know I'm starting to sound like a brochure, but when we're at our best around here, we treat our students as individuals and not generic representatives of categories. We're really very good at that. And it's important.

The third thing Jesus does in Luke 19:5 is invite Zacchaeus to share his gifts; he invites himself to Zach's house. He looks up at this short rich guy who doesn't seem to get much good attention and invites him to come out of the audience and into the story.

Our students aren't rich jerks who nobody likes, but we do spend a lot of time and energy inviting them to get out of the audience and into the story. We invite them to fill leadership positions, and do service, and do research. We don't just teach them stories about other people, we work hard to help them write their own stories. We don't educate audience members. We're about identifying and training and coaching producers and directors and cast members.

So Jesus gives good attention to Zacchaeus in Luke 19:5.

And Zacchaeus likes it.

Luke 19:6 says,

*So Zacchaeus hurried down and was happy to welcome him.*

It feels good to get attention.

It feels good to be noticed; to be addressed as a distinct, whole person instead of just a collection of categories.

And it feels good to be invited to share your gifts.

Attention is important. It's essential for human psychological, biological, and interpersonal development.

And we're good at that too.

We celebrate and support each other.

We give lots of awards.

(There are some curmudgeons around here who say we give too many awards—but I don't see them giving back the ones we've given to them.)

Every now and then, it feels good to get attention.  
Because attention is a valuable commodity. It's a resource that's worth investing.

After Zacchaeus hurries down out of the tree and happily welcomes Jesus, Luke tells us

*7All who saw it began to grumble and said,  
"He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."*

One of my favorite parts of this story is that verse 7 passes without comment.

Jesus doesn't argue that Zacchaeus isn't really a sinner, he doesn't say "Yes, but I'm gonna *fix* him."

He just lets the grumblers grumble. Their grumbling is not what the story is about.

The punch line of the story is verse 8:

*8Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord,  
"Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor;  
and if I have defrauded anyone of anything,  
I will pay back four times as much."*

After having been noticed, called by name, and invited into the story, Zacchaeus realizes that his attention is a valuable resource.

It's no accident that we use an economic verb when we talk about attention. We *pay* attention because we understand that attention is a valuable, abundant, and renewable resource.

Zacchaeus ends this story by vowing to pay attention to different things than he had focused on before.

When he says

*Half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor;  
and if I have defrauded anyone of anything,  
I will pay back four times as much."*

he's responding to the attention he received from Jesus by vowing to share his stuff and clean up his messes.

Receiving good attention leads him to pay good attention.

I hope the connection to what we do is clear.

We strive to pay good attention to each student in a way that leads that student to pay good attention. We try to take the right things seriously in our relationship with them and that includes inviting them to take the right things seriously.

We work hard to help them understand that they are gifted—that their attention is a hugely valuable resource.

And then we invite them be intentional about how and where and why they pay their attention.

I want to say one more thing about attention.

Since my high school Latin days, I have always assumed that the English word “attention” came from the Latin *ad teneo*. That literally means “to hold onto.” And it’s an okay way to understand attention. Attention—both given and received—often involves an element of holding onto.

But, while the Oxford English Dictionary mentions *ad teneo* in its discussion of the etymology of the word “attention,” it suggests that “attention” originally come from *ad tendero*—to “stretch toward.”

That’s closer to what we do here.

We don’t just tell our students “Here it is—hope you figure it out.”

Although we certainly want to accompany and assist them—we don’t ultimately want to hold onto them. We want them to graduate and go.

The promise we make is to stretch toward them—to do the hard work of learning about them as unique individuals, addressing them by name, and inviting them out of the audience and into the story.

That’s hard work.

But it’s worth it.

It’s who we are.

It’s what we do.

We’re good at it.

Let’s get busy.