

Sermon for Zion, July 23, 2017

Hymns: Praise Band Set; 64 – Be still and know; 749 – Be still, my soul (vss 1,2,4)

Scripture: Psalms 46 (selected verses); Philippians 4:4-9; John 14:27

Sermon Title: Spiritual Attention Deficit Disorder

Psalms 46 (selected verses) - Responsive

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea.

The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Come and see what the LORD has done; He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth.

He breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.

He says, “Be still, and know that I am God;

I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.”

The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Philippians 4:4-9

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about[d] these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

John 14:27 - *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*

I may have mentioned to you in the past that a psychologist told me I have some degree of A.D.D. – Attention Deficit Disorder. I thought I was simply good at multitasking, but that was just my response to my mind not staying put for very long. Now that I am growing older, I’m finding my latent A.D.D. is getting worse, rather than better, as my ability to multitask degenerates.

I mention all this to explain why, when recently re-reading John Ortberg's book "Love Beyond Reason," a certain chapter title leapt out at me: "Spiritual Attention Deficit Disorder." Ortberg writes:

The first task in the spiritual life, the one to which we must return over and over, is simply this: to pay attention to God. This is challenging enough, considering the difficulty we have in paying attention to anyone. Add to that the challenge of attending to a holy, mysterious, invisible God, and always our sinful nature will attempt to distract us. We have spiritual attention deficit disorder.

My mind is noisy with disordered desires. How do I appear to people? How successful will I be? What will I possess? How attractive am I?

My mind is disturbed by the static of anxiety that accompanies little faith: What will happen tomorrow? What if we don't have enough money? What if I can't solve some problem? What if I mess up, or let people down?

My mind is choppy from the turbulence of my sinful nature. Past regrets speak loudly to me of my spiritual inadequacy. Guilt shouts to me of my hypocrisy. Doublemindedness drives me forward one moment and back the next.

My mind loses its tranquillity to sheer busyness. Too many commitments, too much activity, too little sleep, too much stimulation, too much talking, too many distractions - I have Spiritual Attention Deficit Disorder."

Ortberg continues with an illustration: *When you throw a stone into a pond, the stone will create ripples that reach the shore all the way around - but only if the pond is still. When the pond is quiet and still, the arrival of the stone can be read over the entire surface.*

But when the pond is not still, when the surface of the water is already ruffled and tossed, the arrival of the stone will go undetected. The ripples will be lost in the frantic motion of the surface. We're the ruffled pond. God is the pebble.

Ortberg's conclusion: *Stillness is always the prerequisite for receptivity. Stillness first, then listening. The order cannot be reversed. "Be still and know that I am God," quotes the Psalmist.*

The Psalmist says this is the mark of a soul attuned to God - when we learn to still our heart. Stillness means we are no longer constantly at the mercy of our desires and reflexes and demands that keep me from being able to discern the pebble, the "still small voice," that is the signal that God wants to speak. We enter into a new era of listening. We have stilled our soul.

Are you able to find moments of true “stillness of soul?” If not, do you think you might have “Spiritual Attention Deficit Disorder” (S.A.D.D.)? Well, here’s a test; see if you answer “yes, that’s me” to the following five statements:

- I try to pray, but my mind wanders after a few moments.
- I try to read the Bible, but can’t stay awake.
- I make a commitment to try harder, to focus, to set aside time to pray or read the Bible, but tomorrow comes and I’ve forgotten already.
- I sit in church and listen to one of the most brilliant, engaging, dynamic, humble preachers in all Canada, but even he begins to drone on and on and sets my mind to wander.
- I can read a 300 page suspense or romance novel with no real point or redeeming value in just a few days, but a book about God or spirituality leaves me drooling and near-catatonic after just a few pages.

If you answered in the affirmative to three or more of these statements, you have Spiritual Attention Deficit Disorder.

The good news is, there’s help for us all. It would be nice if there was medication we could take, a sort of holiness hypodermic, a piety pill, a righteousness Ritalin, but there isn’t. However, as with many forms of ADD, there are non-medicinal forms of treatment - there are strategies to help us focus and overcome. We can make these four strategies a summer project of sorts, a way of getting in shape not for the bathing suit (too late for that), but a way of getting in shape for the great things that God has in store for us, for the words God would speak to us, if only we can manage to pay attention long enough to receive them.

First, before we can even start, we need to eliminate, as much as is possible, the external sources of distraction from our environment. We need to develop a strategy to promote moments of stillness, of focus, of attentiveness to the presence of God, and of rest.

Strategy number one then is: Be still. We with SADD need to set aside a time, a place, a refuge in our chaos to be still, and know, that God is there.

Your first response will be to say, “Ha! Impossible. There’s no way I could find even five minutes in my day for stillness, for quiet, for peace. There are too many

things I have to do, too many needs I have to meet.” Oddly, I have discovered that retirees are often the first to tell me how busy they are now that they’re retired. I regard this as nothing other than a form of cruel gloating. I hope I live long enough to tell people who are still having to work, just how much busier I am now that I’m retired. The point is, retired or not, we need to look at our lives very carefully and with a determination to see where we can find our spiritual refuge.

Notice I’m not asking you to do anything in your time of quiet, other than to be quiet. Not just quiet, though - intentionally quiet. Concentrate on - work on - being quiet, being still. This is not so easy; your mind hates being still, in fear that you will produce an important, insightful or original thought. Resist the temptation to turn on the TV. Time in front of the TV is not quiet time. Instead, free from external noise and distraction, take a moment to stand back and observe your mind whirring about, until, embarrassed by the attention, it slows down a bit. Then you’re ready for the next step.

Strategy number two: Focus. When you have settled your heart, your mind, your stomach - then and only then, focus. Turn your thoughts to God. This is a perfect summer activity, and can be done marvellously well from the comfort of a lawn chair. Turn your thoughts to God - maybe by thinking about what God has created; maybe by thinking about what God has done, is doing, will do in your life; maybe by thinking about some way in which God touched your life recently, or made you aware of God’s presence. Focus your thoughts on God.

Strategy number three: When you have found stillness, when you have focused on God, then pray. Don’t worry about grammar or structure or proper technique - just pray. A prayer of thanks, maybe: “Thanks, God for that hummingbird. What a great creation.” Or, a prayer for help: “I don’t know how I’m going to get through these next few weeks, God, and I can’t do it without your help.” Or, a prayer on behalf of another: “Father, you know how my neighbour is struggling. Help him in those long days at the hospital, and help his dear wife too.” That’s all prayer is; a simple conversation with God.

Strategy number four (the final SADD strategy I’ll talk about today – there are more, but I realize I’m working with short attention spans, here – particularly mine) is to recover the Sabbath. God built into our week a day of recovery, a day of pause in the chaos, a pit stop in the rat race. It used to be called the Sabbath. Now we call it

Sunday. God seemed to be under the impression that this day of rest was vital for all creation. Listen (Exodus 20:8-11 CEV):

Remember that the Sabbath Day belongs to me. You have six days when you can do your work, but the seventh day of each week belongs to me, your God. No one is to work on that day - not you, your children, your slaves, your animals, or the foreigners who live in your towns. In six days I made the sky, the earth, the oceans, and everything in them, but on the seventh day I rested. That's why I made the Sabbath a special day that belongs to me.

Did you get that? “*The Sabbath belongs to me,*” says God, three times in that one Commandment alone. The Sabbath belongs to God, and God, with incredible generosity, has gifted it back to us. It is, sadly, a gift we have largely rejected, choosing to make Sunday just as chaotic as any other day, missing the point that a day of rest is as vital to our mind, body and Spirit as food and drink itself. Let me encourage you to make Sunday a day of rest again - a rest from the regular demands and responsibilities of the week. Start your Sunday by worshipping with God’s people, but don’t let it end at the church door. Make it a day of connecting with God, wherever the day may take you.

To sum up, we need to recover the idea that a time of rest is every bit as important as busy times, but we need to remember that there is a difference between resting and doing nothing. A rest becomes truly refreshing and renewing and re-creative and regenerating when we take that rest and focus our minds on the source of true rest and peace – when we spend time with God. Give your body - and your Spirit - a break.

You know, most times, I don’t think we mean to fall away in our relationship with God. I just think that many of us, distracted by everything that goes on in our lives and in our world, simply stop paying attention. Many of us simply lose sight of Jesus. But he’s there. He’s always there. Taking time to notice could very well change your life.

Face it, we have S.A.D.D. Our lack of ability to focus our attention on God is at the root of our inability to grow and mature as Christians, to progress past the weaning stage and into fullness of life and joy. The God who created us taught us that, “*In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength*” (Isaiah 30:15). If you believe this to be true, or if you’d like to find out if it really is, then this summer, find some time to: Be Still. Focus. Pray. Rest.

This summer, spend some time with Jesus. And feel your mind grow clear, your heart grow strong, and your Spirit stretch its wings and fly.

Again, the last word goes to Jesus: *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”* (John 14:27)

Amen.