

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (Nov. 4, 2018)
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

“Dappled with sunlight.”

That’s the phrase that came to mind as I looked at the pattern of sunlight on the leaves and pine needles on the ground. “Dapple” is one of my favorite words – and I don’t get to use it very often in preaching!

The other day, I had the chance to take a walk in a local park. The breeze felt wonderful against my face. The trees were awash in the brilliant colors of the leaves: red, yellow and gold. My eyes were entranced.

My nose noticed the unique aroma of the woods in the fall - the fallen leaves, the wet pine needles. I kept filling my nose with the scent of autumn.

My ears heard the squirrels rustling through the leaves, burying acorns for the winter. And as the breeze shook the branches, it changed the pattern of the sunlight on the floor of the woods. Yes, it was *dappled*.

What a feast for my senses!

As I walked in the beauty of God’s creation, I just *paid attention*. I *focused*, with every sense, on the beauty around me. Being there, just paying attention there, I was overwhelmed by the handiwork of God. Quietly, I started to sing: “Then sings my soul my savior God to thee, how great thou art.” I felt so grateful.

Off to my left, I saw a family on another trail. I was in such a good mood, so I said a brief prayer asking God to bless them.

I was behind them, but it looked like they were lined up in order of height. Dad first, then mom, then a child who looked to be about 13, then the smallest (who may have been about 4.) The four year old kept stopping: he would lean down to pick up a pine cone, or look up to try to catch a leaf that was falling down.

Then he’d run to catch up.

Eventually I caught up with this family, and what I saw broke my heart. In front was dad. And as he walked in this beautiful woods, he was staring at his cell phone. Then came mom, staring at her cell phone. Then the 13 year old, staring at the cell phone. Then the four year old, who was enraptured an acorn he’d found.

I wanted to shout: “Stop staring at your phones. Turn them off, and pay attention to the beauty God created. Put the electronics away.” I wanted to say, “your ‘smart’ phones have made you dumb! The smartest person in your family is the four year old!”

I felt angry, and said to God, “why are people so willing to be distracted? Why do people choose distractions, so that they miss the life and beauty which you created? Lord, why did they walk in your woods, if they are not going to pay attention to you?”

Of course, as I passed judgment on that family, I was choosing to be distracted. I was choosing not to focus on our Father.

For just a few minutes, in the woods, I had been focused on God. I was paying attention to the Lord with every one of my senses. When I first saw that family, my instinct was right - I said a prayer for them. And then, I lost my focus on the God who made the woods and made those people. I judged them, because they were not doing things my way (and as we all know, my ways are... *infallible!*)

I didn't need a phone to distract me. I had anger in my heart – which distracts me even more.

In today's 1st reading and Gospel reading, people of faith are commanded to love the Lord our God. And let's be clear – we are not being commanded to ‘feel a certain feeling.’ In the Bible, love is much more than a warm fuzzy feeling. There is no *Book of the Prophet Hallmark* in the Old Testament!

When the Scriptures talk about love – the love of God and the love of neighbor – the Bible is describing a *decision*. The decision which changes our lives. The decision to do the right thing for the one we love. The decision to put the other first.

When the Bible calls us to love, it is an invitation to learn about that person, to pay complete attention to them. When we fall in love with someone, we cannot wait to see them, to be with them, to talk with them, to hold their hand. When the Bible calls us to love, it is a call to *focus*, to *pay attention*.

In the first reading, the people of Israel are told: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.’ And Jesus says that we must love our heavenly Father with all our heart, mind, soul, strength.

Both readings teach us that loving God requires that we *focus our attention on him*. Our heart, our mind, our spirit, our strength – everything focused on the God who breathed life into us, the God who created a woods full of beauty just because, just for us.

In the woods the other day, I *was* loving God that way. For just a few minutes, my heart, mind

and soul were focused on him. My eyes, ears, nose, skin, were all focused on his beauty. I was paying attention to him, and his world. My heart was so full, I *had* to sing.

And then... I chose to be distracted. 'Cell phones!' My focus was no longer on the Lord. My senses were not centered on Christ. And I was right back to America's favorite sins: anger, and passing judgment.

Love God with every fiber of your being. That's what the Bible is teaching us. Which means, *focus*. Pay attention. Look for the Lord. Listen. Hear. When I am focused like that, I am loving Him: heart, mind and soul.

No. This does not mean that we all need to move to the woods. That might be fun, but unrealistic.

But while I was walking in the woods, I was paying attention... to God. I was looking... for God. Listening to God. Heart, mind, soul, eyes, ears, nose... I *wanted* to experience God in that moment.

Well, I can do that *anywhere*. God's presence is not limited to local parks. God is everywhere. Mother Theresa paid attention, she was focused – and she discovered God in suffering people. Sick people were not a distraction to her – they were a revelation, because she was paying attention.

God's presence is not limited to perfect moments. Saint Catherine learned a lot about God by paying attention to her cat. St. Vincent de Paul paid attention, and discovered God in the poor of France.

Saint Claire paid attention, and discovered God in silence, *and* in doing the laundry. Saint Elizabeth Seton paid attention, and discovered God when she taught 4th graders

Cats and laundry and sickness and fourth graders. Many of us might conclude that those things are distractions from God.

But the saints are the saint precisely because they pay attention. They are focused. They know that God is everywhere, and in everyone. And when their daily life is full of work and tasks and decisions and difficulties, they just keep paying attention. They know that God is there. And they experience him, because they have learned to focus, to recognize him. He is there. And they love him.

In the woods, I passed judgment on three members of a family. That was a sin, born of angers I carry deep within. It wasn't a phone that distracted me – it was my imperfect heart.

Are you allowing someone or something to distract you? Perhaps a certain politician or political

party? An upcoming election? Are you allowing greed or entertainment to distract you? Are you allowing yourself to be distracted by ambition, or lust, or fear?

Are you distracted from the God who is present in the unborn child, the child stuck in failing schools, the teen caught in addiction? Have you lost focus, forgetting that God is present in your spouse, your estranged family member, the stranger seeking refuge and a home?

This week, as you walk through your daily life, pay attention, stay focused. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your eyes and ears and heart and mind. God is everywhere, in everything, in everyone. There is, in the end, no such thing as a distraction. If we are paying attention, we soon learn that distractions are just God wearing a different disguise, teaching us how to love him, in new and dappled ways.

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