

“Distracted”
a sermon
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Trinity Reformed Church
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Jeremiah 2:4–13

Hebrews 13:1–8, 15–16

Every week comes round with the same task for me. I have to come up with a sermon title. Some of you might remember my friend Gregg Mast, the president of New Brunswick seminary, preaching here a few years back. He told us all how he had given up on sermon titles a long time ago. Well, although I find the idea, at times, a little tempting, I’m not to that point yet. I find that picking a title can help me in narrowing down what I’m going to say in my sermon. It gives me some focus.

Jana’s on vacation now, and I was gone for the week just prior to her leaving. This meant that I needed to get her all the bulletin information for the three Sundays she was to be away, and I had to do this before *I* went away. That meant I had to decide way in advance the hymns, Bible passages, prayers of confession and, of course, sermon titles going through next Sunday. Doing so was going to make things much easier, over all, for Jana and for me. And I suppose it did. Doing so, truly, helped give me some focus.

But, in some ways, it’s a real risk to pick out titles that far ahead of time. For things might come up. New insights might arrive, showing that the direction I had intended to take is not really adequate to the meaning of the Bible passage, or does not highlight an aspect of that passage particularly needed by all of us at a certain time.

Other times, though, it happens that the title I choose early on turns out to be more fitting than I had expected. Sometimes there is a correspondence, eerie or funny, expressive or ironic, but in any case surprising, between the title chosen early and what I experience in the days when I’m actually putting the sermon together.

This is one of those titles. And I have to tell you, the fittingness of this title for my last few days — oh, let’s make it the last few weeks! — is a little disconcerting. If you haven’t yet glanced at the bulletin for the title, go ahead and do so now. For the benefit of those listening in from the nursery, the title is “Distracted.” And I have to say, that’s me! I am distracted. And so it seems that, of all the titles I’ve used, this has to be the most fitting. (Except, of course, for the sermon from 2008 I called “Are you Hungry?” — that title seems to fit me very well, too).

Distracted. I have felt so distracted lately, so lacking in focus. Perhaps some of you feel that way, too, that you would count yourself among the distracted!

For me, sure, and perhaps for you, it could be the effects of summertime. In our house, summer might be slower, or it might feel busier than other times of the year. But, without a doubt, summer in the Griswold house is definitely louder! Or maybe the cause of distraction is the steadily rising pollen count as we get ever nearer to September (the worst time of year for my allergies). Or perhaps the distracted feeling comes from the several really, really big issues going on right now, headline-grabbing issues: the terrible economy; the wars and conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq; political discord locally, nationally,

and everywhere in between. These are just a few things that increase our anxiety, throw off our focus, and feed our sense of distraction.

Distraction, I think, is what we see in the Old Testament passage I read. But there it is a much more serious distraction, far more serious than the distractions I've named. This is a spiritual distraction, one that arises out of and afflicts the soul. It is a distraction from God.

That's right. The people had been distracted from God. They had turned their backs on God. And God notices. Yes, God is well aware of their behavior, and God is not pleased. So God speaks forcefully against this behavior, judges it, confronts them with it. God asks them, "Who brought you here, to this land, from slavery in Egypt, through danger and deprivation in the wilderness, who brought you here, to this plentiful land? Don't you remember?"

It was God, of course, who had brought them there. But they had turned away from God, living as if they had no knowledge that God was to be thanked for their peace, their wealth, their health, for their very existence. They forgot all this, and so they forgot God. They gave up on God, the fount of living water, and instead chose to dig their own cisterns, leaky, ineffective as they were. They had left the most precious, the most lovely, the source of all good and beauty, and had gone after worthless things. As Thomas à Kempis said in *The Imitation of Christ*, "It is great folly to neglect the things that are profitable and necessary, and to give our minds to things curious or hurtful."

And so Jeremiah's people came to rely on themselves, rather than on God. They relied on their own wealth. They relied on their own strength. They relied on their own talent. And, eventually, in the emptiness of their self-reliance, they no longer found place for God, having crowded out that place with all their self-reliance. So they installed other gods in that place, in place of the one true God. They turned to the worship of idols, handmade gods of their own craftwork and choosing. And thus their distraction became complete.

A very different way of living is described in the other passage I read, from the book of Hebrews. From it we hear this admonition:

Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have, for [God] has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"

The passage speaks of confidence. And what confidence is expressed there! This confidence, truly, is deep; it is joyful, and total. But it's not *self*-confidence, of course. It's confidence in God; it relies on God's promise to be with us always, God's promise to care for us always.

There's an ancient Christian hymn, so ancient that it's written in Latin, and it expresses so movingly this joyful confidence in God, a song called "Come Holy Spirit." Some of its words, in English, go something like this:

Come, Holy spirit,
send forth from heaven
the ray of thy light;
come, Father of the poor;
come, giver of gifts;
come, light of hearts.

Thou best of consolers,
sweet guest of the soul;
sweet refreshment.
In labor, thou art rest,
in heat, the tempering,
in grief, the consolation.

O light most blessed,
fill the inmost heart
of all thy faithful.
Without your grace,
there is nothing in us,
nothing that is not harmful.

Cleanse what is sordid,
moisten what is arid,
heal what is hurt,
flex what is rigid,
fire what is frigid,
correct what goes astray.

I can't speak for you. But I hear joy there, and I also hear confidence, the kind of confidence that Hebrews commends, not in the self, but rather a confidence that points to dependence on God, absolute, total dependence on God.

Such dependence is in contrast to reliance on wealth. And so we are warned, "Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have." For too many seek their security in wealth, in money, center their lives on it and the pursuit of it. By it many are distracted from God. In money they seek the security that can come, truly, only from God.

And this dependence, Hebrews tells us, is in contrast to fear: “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.” For that really is the root of distraction for many, isn’t it? It is fear: fear of the future, fear of the unknown, fear of the different, fear of the stranger, fear of death or of illness, fear of deprivation, fear of what is not in my control. Such is the shape and depth of our fear. And all these fears, and others besides, provoke our distraction, and, finally, our turn away from God and toward ourselves, from reliance on God to self-reliance.

These two, fear and the love of money, work in tandem with each other, serving to distract us from God. We are driven by our fears. And wealth whispers to us that in *it* we can find relief from our fears. Yet when we respond to its whispers by seeking and following wealth’s empty promises, we find we are even more afraid. And so the cycle continues.

For we do, so often, live in those very ways that stand in contrast to the way of life encouraged by this Hebrews passage, and align far too much with the way of life demonstrated by the people against whom God spoke in the Jeremiah passage.

We rely on our own money.

We rely on our own strength.

We rely on our own talent.

We are, or want to be, try to be, self-reliant. And perhaps that works well enough for awhile. Perhaps it is even, for some, quite successful, when measured by earthbound standards. But it is not the way God made us to live. It is not who God made us to be. God made us to be his creatures, his subjects and servants, and so God has made us to worship God alone and not ourselves nor any other creature. God will not share worship with any other. For God cannot abide a lie. And it is a lie to give final credit to anything or anyone other than God for life, or love, or beauty, or peace, for security, for meaning. To attribute any of these, finally, ultimately, to anyone besides God is a lie. How can we live a lie?

Worse, to rely on these, to attribute to them more meaning and importance than they deserve, is an offense to God. God is offended when we turn to wealth, or talent, or human power or industry or creativity rather than to God for salvation. God is offended when we treat these as all there is in life, the source and destination of all meaning. God is offended when we see our future in them, when we are comforted by them, when we think on these far more than we think on God. God is offended. And so should we.

Is this unrealistic? Does life today simply require us to rely on money, strength, and our (granted) God-given abilities, to survive? What of medicine, and science, and all those products of human industry and intelligence that not only make life more enjoyable but, even more, make it possible for many, simply, to live?

Some of that is true. But I think that many take this necessary truth too far, and begin to invest far too much meaning and purpose and power and authority in money, strength, and talent. For many (perhaps even for us!) these become, quite seriously, a distraction: from reality, from life, from love, from joy, and most importantly, from God.

Such may have been always so, or rather, almost always so. For the tendency of human beings to make gods out of their tools is not truly eternal. Only God is truly eternal,

God: the creator of heaven and earth, the redeemer of wayward sinners, the completer of heaven's truest stories. This is the eternal God whom we know through Jesus Christ, who is, as our scripture tells us, "the same yesterday, today, and forever."

And so there, yes, there, in the eternal truth and grace of Jesus Christ, which he shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit, we find the corrective to our distraction. In Jesus we discover the antidote to our fear. In receiving his love, in loving him back, in allowing his love to carry our love and our love to be converted into his love, we can find our center, our home, our beginning and middle and end. In Jesus Christ, in him alone, we can truly find our confidence, our focus, our simplicity.

These days, a number of us find ourselves distracted. To all of you I urge you to seek focus, simplicity, and peace in Jesus Christ. Seek his guidance and example in scripture. Pray to God the Father in the name of Jesus and through his eternal intercession. Meditate on his name, so that you may listen and hear his Spirit, the Holy Spirit, speak to you, guide you, mold you into the disciple God intends you to be, that you be, not distracted, but focused and dependent on God most holy.