
Pay Attention To Where You Are Paying Attention

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
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An old friend of mine tells the story of living in Manhattan, New York City, where both the streets and sidewalks are full. The art of walking briskly on the sidewalks without running into someone might be just as difficult as driving in that city. One day, as he walked down the street, my friend noticed someone standing still on the sidewalk and staring straight up, staring as high as he could toward the top of the buildings.

My friend stopped, too, and he began to look for whatever it was the first man was looking at. What could it be? Before too long, others had also stopped; they were peering intently into the sky. Finally, of course, there might have been thirty to forty folks on the sidewalk of New York, stopped and staring up into the heights.

Maybe you know the story. It turns out that the first man was not looking at anything in particular at all. He was staring at nothing; but his odd posture-looking somewhere where others were not looking-drew attention. It did not matter that no one could actually see anything unusual; they still stopped and stared in the direction the first man was looking.

I sometimes use this story to illustrate one of my principles of Christian leadership. "Be careful where you focus attention." Or it might be better stated as "Pay attention to where you are paying attention." People tend to look at the same places where others are looking. And, if the leader herself is looking in a particular direction, there will be many more people looking in that direction.

If you are one of the heads of your household, and you spend your time in a particular activity -say, watching television every evening from 7:00 to 9:00-the chances are good that others in your household will end up doing the same thing. If you, a leader in your family, let yourself be distracted by event x, then many others in your family will also become distracted by event x. If your preaching is full of complaint and depression, your congregation also learns to model that behavior.

I remind the staff at the Cathedral of another way to model attentive behavior. If someone is speaking in a large meeting, or in a large hall, it is the responsibility of other leaders to focus their attention on the speaker. That way, everyone else in the room will focus, too. As soon as another leader begins a side conversation, attention is distracted from the task at hand.

In the Episcopal Church these days, in the Anglican Communion, and in the greater Christian Church, there are lots of side conversations. Some of these conversations are important, but most probably are not. There is no reason that we must pay attention to every side conversation. St. Paul reminded us at Romans 14:17 that "the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

The great Danish writer, Soren Kierkegaard, called it, "Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing." Our postcommunion prayer asks that we might serve God "with gladness and singleness of heart." (Book of Common Prayer, page 365). Jesus said things like "the eye is the lamp of the body, no one can serve two masters, seek first the kingdom of God" (Matthew 6). Pay attention to where you are paying attention; seek first the kingdom of God.

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