



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker -  
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## Prayer: Keeping the Right Focus

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 14:25-33

It is a well-known phenomenon that we do not notice anything happening in our surroundings while being absorbed in the inspection of something; focusing our attention on a certain object may happen to such an extent that we cannot perceive other objects placed in the peripheral parts of our visual field, although the light rays they emit arrive completely at the visual sphere of the cerebral cortex.—Rezso Balint

If thoughts comes to us while we pray, we ought to stop saying the prayer and make room for such thoughts, listen to them in silence, and under no circumstances obstruct them. The Holy Spirit preaches to us here in prayer, and one word of the Holy Spirit's sermon is far better than a thousand of ours.—Martin Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*

### Introduction to Scripture Lesson

Our Scripture Lesson today is from the Gospel of Matthew chapter 14, verses, 25-33.

To set the scene: Jesus has sent the disciples off in a boat to cross the sea of Galilee, while he goes up into the mountains by himself to pray. But a strong wind has come up and the disciples have been out at sea all night in the midst of it—making no headway, but not being able to make their way back to shore, either. So early in the morning Jesus comes walking—on the water—out to them.

I'll follow the translation in your pew Bibles, the New Revised Standard Version, except for one word in verse 31. "You of little faith, why did you . . ."—stop there. The Greek word that comes next is used in only one other place in the New Testament, also in the Gospel of Matthew in an almost identical way. When a word is used that rarely, translators depend on context to figure out its meaning. Clearly, Jesus is drawing a contrast with faith, so translators have decided upon "doubt," because (the reasoning goes) doubt is the opposite of faith. "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" But in other ancient Greek texts the word means, "to be divided," "to have a divided mind," "to be of two minds," "to be distracted." And that's the better translation: "You of little faith, why did you get distracted?"

Because Peter does get distracted. As he—Peter!—is walking on the water—he takes his eyes off Jesus. And that's when he begins to go down. And as I hope you'll see, being distracted—losing your focus—is the opposite of faith. Listen now for God's Word . . .

It's one of those Psychology 101 experiments that makes freshmen think, "Hey, this class might be OK, after all."

It's called "The Gorilla in Our Midst Experiment," and it was most famously conducted by Daniel Simmons to show Sustained Inattentive Blindness.

Simmons made a short video of three people dressed in black tossing around a white ball and three

people dressed in white tossing around a black ball—all in front of an elevator. The graduate lab assistant then instructs the student to watch the video and count how many times the white team tosses the ball. The student watches. “Fifteen!” the student proclaims at the end of the video, pleased to have the right answer.

“That’s great,” the graduate assistant says. “Now, did you notice the gorilla?”

“*Whaaa*—? What gorilla? There wasn’t a gorilla!”

“Watch again—only this time, don’t count.”

Sure enough, there, right in the middle of the video, the elevator door opens, a man dressed in a gorilla suit gets off, stops, looks around, pounds his chest in a gorilla-like way, and then exits stage right.

The majority of people, when counting, don’t notice. The gorilla never blocks their view of the white team.

You can call it Sustained Inattentive Blindness, if you like; or you can also call it focus. No matter: we human beings are good at it—very good.

And it’s a good thing, too, a very good thing. Without focus: work doesn’t get done—including homework—and jobs don’t get started much less finished; without focus children don’t get fed, changed, taught, loved or raised; without focus, discoveries don’t get discovered, inventions don’t get invented; songs are not written or sung; doctors and nurses are not trained, and care is not given; we need focus for the most ordinary tasks of daily life, from driving a car (I have trouble focusing there sometimes) to preparing a meal.

We need focus—without it problems can’t even be recognized and addressed, much less solved. Conversations become aimless; they aren’t even really conversations. Same for our lives.

All human endeavor and achievement—indeed, human consciousness itself—requires focus—Sustained, concentrated, directed attention and effort—focus. Life requires focus.

All of our training—no matter in what—is about learning to focus. And in dramatic situations, this can be impressively, heroically, movingly, poignantly, humanly beautiful.

You’re an astronaut, looking at the moon, as you begin to be pulled into its orbit—and then—suddenly—**BANG!!!** Power down, oxygen level falling. What do you do? Just what you’ve been trained to do: focus.

Check gauge A—toggle switch B. Nothing. Don’t panic: focus. Procedure 2 gauge C— switch D. Power still down; oxygen level still falling : Focus, focus. 3: E, and F. *Come on, come on.* 4, G, H. *Come on!*

And then, when you’ve tried everything, and there’s nothing left to try, nothing left to be done, what do you do? “Er, Houston, we’ve had a problem—over”. Don’t panic, focus. Without focus, problems can’t even be recognized and addressed, much less solved. Focus—then get the duct

tape, and get to work—hey, it worked for Apollo 13.

Focus is a good thing, a very good thing. The problem is keeping the right focus.

And that's why Peter got wet: because he didn't keep the right focus.

Eyes on the prize, Peter, eyes on the prize—don't look down, one step at a time, don't look up, one step at a time, don't worry about the wind, just look at him, Peter, just look at him. Eyes on the prize, Peter, eyes on the prize: keep the faith

If you've ever run alongside teaching a child to ride a bike, you know this. Don't look at your feet on the pedals, don't look at your hands on the handlebars, and don't look at me! Look where you're going, where you want to go—and pedal, keep pedaling. YES! YES! YES! that's it. GO! GO! GO! Keep going. Beautiful! Great! NO! don't look back at me! NO . . . no! . . . OK! OK! OK! You ok?—you're ok. C'mon, you can get back on. Just remember: look where you're going. Focus. (It's always when they look back at you—with that great grin of accomplishment—that you worry they're going down.)

Focus is a good thing, a very good thing. The problem is keeping the right focus. And tragically, and sometimes comically, with the gift of consciousness, we human beings are also susceptible to Sustained Inattentive Blindness—too often we don't see the gorilla in our midst.

And the problem can go from one extreme to the other: sometimes we can't see the forest for the trees; sometimes we can't see the trees for the forest. We all know people who get mired in the details, locked into processes and procedures, obsessed with one or a few particular things—and miss the larger—and much more important—big picture. On the other hand, we all know people who always look at things from 30,000 feet, who have a grand and complicated—you might even say, "grandiose"—theory about everything, but in the process they overlook the obvious truth right in front of them.

So: one of our greatest gifts—our human ability to focus—can also be our greatest downfall. And it's not just the downfall of individuals; entire nations, empires, civilizations have fallen because of our all too human inability to keep the right focus, our all too human tendency to get distracted. The British empire, it has been said, was acquired in a fit of absent-mindedness.

But it's worse today: today, distractions are always beckoning. What is my channel surfing but a desperate, mindless effort to distract myself from my distractions? And it's everywhere, all the time: the internet is the great, global attention-suck of our time, absorbing our thoughts and wasting our time—enticing us to focus on the wrong things.

But the good news is that we're not alone—we have the wisdom and guidance of family, friends, faith and traditions—not to mention the way reality can bite back if we get focused on the wrong thing—all to help us keep the right focus. But behind all that, underwriting all that, and sometimes directly intervening when all that still isn't getting us refocused, we have our Lord Jesus. Remember when Peter gets distracted, when he starts worrying about the wind, and then starts sinking, it's Jesus who extends a hand to save him.

That's nice for Peter, you might say. But what does that look like for us?—especially since not too

many of us are walking on water these days. Well, here's one example:

When I was a young adult, I decided to make prayer a daily habit. And suddenly, you know, I got really smart. I suddenly could see things—and, in particular, see challenges and problems—in the right focus. I could even sometimes see solutions. And I could see that this was somehow associated with my new prayer habit, because, more often than not, the right focus came to me as I was getting up off my knees. So I developed a grand and complicated—you might even say, grandiose—theory involving endorphins in the brain, the brain-mind interface and tapping into my largely untapped reservoir of intellectual brilliance.

It was only on reading Martin Luther's short work on prayer that I saw the obvious truth right in front of me: God listens to us in prayer: God hears our hopes and fears, our joys and heartbreaks, our gratitude and anger in prayer. But God also speaks to us in prayer. Through the Holy Spirit, God speaks to us—and teaches us—in prayer. Hence we can get up off our knees with the right focus, focusing on the right things.

Even when we pray about things that seem too horrific to focus on at all—as we have all done, as we have done this past week—God, through the Holy Spirit, enables us to gain and keep the right focus so we can live as witnesses to God and God's love in the face of the horror.

So throughout Lent, I'll be recommending the habit of prayer—to you and to myself. In prayer, I believe that God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, enables us to get and keep the right focus. And the Holy Spirit, I believe, does the same thing through communion—through the bread and the cup—so we can keep God and ourselves, our world and our lives, in the right focus.

And speaking of focus, our Annual Meeting immediately after worship today—yes, I know it can be easy to lose focus and get distracted during an annual meeting, especially with the smells of the Chili Roundup wafting up from Fellowship Hall. But try to stay focused; if you can, I think you'll see that as a church we've kept the right focus. Looking back over the past year and forward to the next, the particulars are good—we had a budget surplus for 2017, and our spend rate on invested funds for 2018 will be the lowest it's been in nine years, which is as long as we've been keeping track. More than that, the big picture is good; we've kept our focus on our Lord, loving God and neighbor as God has been about the work of transforming lives. And no, I'm not looking back with a great grin of accomplishment right before I go down. What I am doing is saying thank you, to you, the congregation, because the Holy Spirit has been working through you to help us keep the right focus. Thank you.

Eyes on the prize, Westminster, eyes on the prize: one step at a time, just look at him, one step at a time, just look at him, eyes on the prize, Westminster, eyes on the prize: keep the faith.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.