

The Last Sunday of Pentecost 2014 in the week of Thanksgiving.  
St. Augustine's in the Woods, Freeland. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

I had a great vacation in Florida! And as we moved around I also had a few times of peace and quiet to think. Early last Sunday morning, as I was driving to church, I was listening to NPR on University of Central Florida station. Because it was Sunday morning they were doing some more reflective stuff - in this case a commentary by a WUCF professor. She began by telling a story. As part of a class project she and her students watched a video. At the beginning they were told that, firstly, it was a video of a basketball game and, secondly, that their responsibility was to keep track of which team made the greatest number of consecutive passes. At the end, they were told, they would be asked a question. So they watched, and they counted. At the end they were asked the question - it so shocked and surprised them that at first they thought it was a joke. What question? I'll tell you in a minute.

Another thing Rachel and I did in Florida was to go to the movies. We both enjoy movies; some for their pure entertainment value, but we particularly love those movies that do a great job of challenging us to think. Best of all are those movies that challenge us to think when we don't realize they're challenging us to think!

Such a movie is "Interstellar." Now if you plan to see this movie you might want to leave now, or put on some headsets, or take a nap!

"Interstellar" is an engrossing movie - it takes on things like the actual consequences of space travel where  $E=MC^2$  - one of the consequences of  $E=MC^2$  - the Theory of Relativity - is that a person traveling across space ages at a different rate than if they stayed on earth.

"Interstellar" is also an irritating movie - the soundtrack - the background music - was sometimes so loud that it was really difficult to hear the dialogue, especially as some of the times it was really loud seemed also to be the times when the most important stuff was going on! You know how it usually goes - gentle, quiet music in emotional moments, grand, march-like music when some brave or bold action was taking place. But in this movie that wasn't the pattern. It was so irritating that after the movie was over we complained to the manager. And she said something that so shocked and surprised us that at first we couldn't believe it.

**So what was the question after the basketball video? What did the movie theater manager say?**

The question after the students and professor had faithfully counted each team's passes was this: **"did you see the dancing bear?"** They all thought it had to be a joke - perhaps they'd watched the wrong movie. It was stupid! Crazy! Insulting! So they watched the video again. Sure enough, a man in a bear suit danced across the screen from one side to another, exiting 'stage left' with a moon walk that Michael Jackson would have been proud to have emulated! And none of them saw it! Not one. **They were so focused on the bouncing ball they missed the dancing bear.**

What did the movie theater manager say about the soundtrack? The director had written an article

explaining that he had intentionally made the soundtrack extra-loud at certain places in the movie.

The takeaway from the Dancing Bear video? We're often told that we should focus on something and, being human beings, when we're challenged to do something and engage that challenge we can become so focused that we completely miss what else is happening.

And the movie? The loudest places, where it was hardest to hear, were those moments when the characters were talking about what, in the greater scheme of things, really mattered: their relationships with each other, the love that they shared or wanted to share, or how that love was much more important than the science they were engaged in, or the quest they were on.

That's a metaphor for how we can end up living our lives – how a focus on things during a busy life can so easily take us away from the people we love; that people die before we want them to, and before we're ready to let them go; that we can waste our time with anger and hatred, and that for all the amazing and wonderful things we have done the only thing that really endures, that lives beyond our limited, finite lives, is love.

As 21<sup>st</sup> Century human beings we are awed by the amazing discoveries the sciences have made about the universe we inhabit. We have split the atom, cured intractable diseases, extended our life-spans by decades; we have learned more about ourselves and expanded so far beyond the first humans' horizons in a few thousand years of human history - and especially in the last few hundred years - than in the millions of years sentient beings have been on this planet, done more than in the billions of years since the "big bang."

But in the midst of the most remarkable and astonishing human achievements, the greatest expansion of knowledge in the history of humanity, we have failed to honor and cherish and love each other and the creation we inhabit.

The innate human ability to count the passes, to focus so sharply and accurately on tasks, on the things of life, and the reinforcement we get from the spectacular successes that we've achieved... all of these things have distracted us from the affairs of our hearts.

The basketball video and the movie are two sides of the same story: When we allow ourselves to focus on tasks given – offered – to us by others – or the ones we choose for ourselves – without asking why – or even if – those tasks are ultimately the most important, when we allow ourselves to be blinded by spectacular successes in only some areas of human existence and striving, we're not really living fully into our greatest human potential.

I think we allow ourselves to be distracted in this way because to do other is really hard work. It's easier to take the black-and-white answer, be dazzled by the spectacular, than to accept, and embrace, and rejoice in the fact that we human beings are complex, complicated beings; that sometimes - often? - we actively choose to close ourselves off because vulnerability and openness are risky things to do. We allow ourselves to be distracted because we fear the loss of control that human relationships necessarily require. It's easier to invest ourselves in things, in

processes, in activity, because in the end they're less demanding, they don't expose us to the fear of being found out to be human. I know I do this. Which is why I was able to see the humor in a quote I came across while following up on the theory of relativity - something Albert Einstein said: *"Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I'm not sure about the universe."*

So for me the video and the movie were both invitations to focus and to listen through the noisy gongs and clanging cymbals, the empty, echoing booms of our world for the still, small voice of God that is the love within us and around us; to recognize for me - and maybe for you - that the easier way - the way of giving to cynicism, or anger, or fear, or anxiety, or a focus on things - that way is not what we as human beings and as people of faith are called to be and to do.

Human community - even in what appears mostly mundane - is about more than this, it has to be about the grander panoply of human existence and identity, of love, or we're really wasting our time. As one writer has said: *"Love is what we are born with. Fear is what we learn. The spiritual journey is the unlearning of fear and prejudices and the acceptance of love back in our hearts. Love is the essential reality and our purpose on earth. To be consciously aware of it, to experience love in ourselves and others, is the meaning of life. Meaning does not lie in things. Meaning lies in us."* (Marianne Williamson)

We've built a lot here over these past years - mostly "brick and mortar" stuff but also something of true community. But now I believe we're being asked a question,: What about the affairs of our hearts? If I was to sum up the major learning of the CAT survey it would be that amid the success we - I - you and me - we've let the focus on the affairs of our hearts slip and we need to reclaim it.

That seems a particularly poignant observation to me as we mark an ending - liturgically this is the last Sunday of the year. What's going to happen in the new year? Where should we be headed? How should we get there?

I know for myself that the habits of my heart are a little rusty and need some work! Perhaps you feel the same. I think it's fitting that rather than making the focus of this Sunday the traditional one - the exclusively regal focus on Jesus as "Christ the King - " we're focusing more on Thanksgiving - and I mean that with a big and a small 't'.

So my invitation to you today is to join with me so that together we can refocus on the habits of our hearts that lie at the center of our faith, things like joy, and peace, and patience, and compassion and justice, and respect, and, community and, of course, love. It's the right thing to do. It always is.