

The average American spends about 6 hours, on any given day, interacting with their phones, and just under half the population of this country is online almost constantly. There are a lot of tech entities these days competing for our attention: social media, rolling news, online shopping ... our brains are asked to track a lot, pay attention and switch attention, a lot.

And at some point, all this stuff, breaks up and fragments our attention, our attention just kinda disintegrates into distraction. And staying distracted seriously impacts our ability to think or live well; when we're distracted, we can totally miss the life that's happening right in front of us.

Distraction in this technological age is particularly hard to resist, but some distractions we choose, because distraction can also serve a purpose.

It can help us avoid things, things we really don't want to pay attention to, truths we might not want to acknowledge, hard emotions we'd really rather not feel, things/truths about ourselves or our relationships or our lives or the world that we'd really rather not confront.

Whether we're grateful for distraction or mindlessly swept into it, the potential for distraction is everywhere; we can get so acclimated to the state of being distracted that we can come to think of it as entirely 'normal,' that it's normal to be chronically distracted.

Chronically distracted from what's really important, right here, and now, chronically distracted from the stuff of life, from the people, we really should be giving our attention to.

When Jesus showed up in Jerusalem, our gospel texts tell us he got a lot of attention. His attention was firmly fixed on God and on his call to bring all people back into relationship with God and one other, to heal what was broken, to make folks whole and free.

The attention he was getting, because of his teachings and his actions, brought him into conflict with the religious authorities. Jesus was, after all, something of an unwanted distraction for them, a distraction from the established way of things, from how it had always been.

They try to get him figured out, but they don't get very far when they question him about who he is, what authority he has for doing what he's doing, so they decide to try to entrap him. And they deploy something that's usually really effective for us humans.

I think they try to entrap him with distraction.

... they ask Jesus a question about paying taxes, a question that has no clear or straightforward answer, they know full well Jesus risks upsetting someone with his answer, and they want folks to pay attention to that. Did he support the emperor or was he against the emperor?

If we imagine a scene like this taking place today, this question being asked of one of us, I imagine it would be a pretty good way to get our attention. Taxes were then and are still bound up with folks' lived experience, they're bound up with frustrations and injustices, with ideologies, they're bound up with who or what has our allegiance, there's a lot in a question about taxes we can get caught up in, give our attention to, there's a lot in that question that could get us and keep us all distracted.

... distracted from God, distracted from truly knowing, caring, and loving each other. Distracted from the healing we need and the healing others long for.

We can, for sure, and we must, care about the stuff of the world, including taxes – but what Jesus was being lured into was intended to trap him and distract folks, so everyone might lose sight of his call to be faithful, to live faithfully. Distraction, from the Latin, literally means to drag or pull apart.

And there's all kinds of 'stuff' in this world, of this world, then and now, that would have us stay distracted, our attention pulled apart, our attention pulled away from Jesus, our love of him who saves us, pulled away from our own commitment to discipleship.

Stuff that's intended to keep us distracted from God's call to us all to be free and to live life fully, stuff that'll keep us distracted from our call to walk in love; there's a lot of stuff, there's always a lot of stuff, that will keep us distracted from the transforming, healing, and liberating power of God's love.

Jesus refuses to get drawn in, worldly distraction is no trap for him.

Implicit in his response, I think, is "don't get distracted." We, all of us, have a lot to do, there's much to be done in each human heart and it's easy to avoid that by getting snared by someone else's provocation. If we don't give what truly matters our attention, if we don't pay attention to our own conversion of heart and of life, nothing changes, injustices remain, violences will remain, the world stays the same.

Implicit in Jesus' response, I think, is Jesus saying, keep your attention on who I am and what I am bringing into the world; on how it is we need, together, to live into God's promise, respond to our invitation to participate in the life of the kingdom of heaven ... that's what needs our attention.

Attention, from the Latin, means to stretch towards, direct the mind towards – Jesus is saying don't let this world pull you apart, instead, come to me.

Be attentive to what it is we long for, for ourselves and for the world, because when we get lost in distraction we jeopardize that future, stuck in a present we long to be different. Being distracted stops us keeping our hearts and minds, our thoughts and actions, from attentively and intentionally joining in the co-creation of the world we really want to live in tomorrow.

A world that's better, a world without hate, or exploitation, without oppression or injustice, without violence, war, a world where kids don't risk or lose their lives simply going to school.

If we want to transform this world, if we want to transform our own lives, we have to keep our attention firm on our purpose, our call, on the way Jesus is leading us on.

And we can practice, by paying attention to how we want to feel at the end of each day, keep that goal in mind - how do we want to have used our time, what do we want to have done, how do we want to have been with others in the way we speak and act, how do we want to make the folks we meet each day feel? How will we walk in love.

We can practice by setting time aside each day to pay our attention only to God.

If we can learn to pay our attention rightly, despite the very many forces in this world that would gleefully keep us distracted, if we can pay our attention to God, and to who we are and how we live, we will for sure be doing the work God has given us to do.

Maybe Jesus' questioners were amazed because Jesus was not distractable, he refused to be drawn in. His attention, on God and on God's call on his life, is unshakeable. To him it's entirely clear, give to God what is God's - and isn't that all that we are, everything that is?

These past weeks in the gospel of Matthew Jesus has been teaching us/telling us who he is so that we might know him, and choose to follow him, into freedom and fullness of life from this broken, and hurting world, that keeps itself just as it is by keeping us distracted from what could be.

This world of distraction will keep trying to pull us apart. Jesus will keep stretching us towards, drawing our minds towards, and our hearts, and our lives towards him, towards God, and towards one another, and towards the life we're called to create together.

Give to God what is God's ... and this, most fundamentally, surely, is our attention.