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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: I Corinthians 13
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“Something To Do With Paying Attention,”
With a Nod to David Foster Wallace
“Attention, taken to its highest degree,
is the same thing as prayer.
It presupposes faith and love.
Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.”
-Simone Weil

Some of the most often heard words of Scripture, in this or any church, are the famous words we have just heard, written by the Apostle Paul to the church at Corinth. It's true we only occasionally read it on Sunday mornings, but if you attend a funeral around here, there's a fair chance you'll hear those words. They were, for example, read last weekend, when Laura and I celebrated the life of someone who had loved much and well throughout her life. But I will confess that the phrase that always leaps out at me, the one I wish to think about further this morning, is this: “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.”

There's something very wise about those words, something necessary even, for there are times in our individual and cultural lives when we are called to ever greater maturity. That maturity has to do with extending our capacities for loving one another, and caring for the world around us - *Amor Mundi* I called it last week. But I always detect something wistful and sad in Paul's words. For they seem to imply passing into a dimension where the child inside of us, that part within each of us that is capable of play and vulnerability and easily accessible emotions, is no longer available. Are there not times when we need children to summon us out of our adult conceptions?

I experienced both dimensions of Paul's words this past summer during a road trip down to New Orleans. I'd like to share that story this morning - which contains a story within a story - as a way of opening up the meaning of this passage for our own lives. But as we move toward welcoming new friends - new members - next week, I think it may also shed light on the kind of community FCCOL aspires to be. Whether you're new to this place or, if you're like my friend Carleen, you've been here for most of your life, I hope it all might serve to clarify who we are, and who we're called to be.

Here's the story. As we made our way down to New Orleans last summer, we made what amounted to a six hour detour on what was already a very long drive. Our detour destination was Oxford, Mississippi, a place I had fallen for pretty hard on a previous visit. This time, I wanted to go to William Faulkner's house. I wanted to see once again the town square, where Faulkner would stagger around after getting loaded on Saturday nights, and other nights too. I wanted to

soak in a little more of the Civil Rights history of the town, and I wanted to eat soul food at the Ajax Diner. But above all, I wanted to visit Square Books, a legendary bookstore that is, to me, one of the most inviting bookstores in the entire country. Oxford is worth a six hour detour, if not to my children, then at least to me.

We had a great day there, capped off by a visit to the bookstore, my sacred shrine. I had intended to browse it pretty thoroughly, to comb through the shelves for treasures. But I got stuck when I pulled a book off a display table. I flipped through it, then found a well hidden chair in a back corner of the bookstore, a place where my children wouldn't discover me, and I began to read.

The book was entitled *Something Having To Do With Paying Attention*, by one of my all time favorite authors, David Foster Wallace. It so happens that the book I was then holding was a stand alone episode from a longer novel by Wallace called *The Pale King*, left unfinished at the time of his death in 2008. I had read this excerpt before, but I loved it, and there in Oxford, I quickly became absorbed in the story. I'd like to tell it to you, because it concerns those words from the Apostle Paul: "When I became an adult, I put away childish things."

The story is about a young man who is utterly adrift in the world. He has spent the better part of his college years abusing substances and watching television. He is, in a very real way, a kind of child, held in a state of prolonged adolescence. Very little matters to this young man, least of all the final exam in American Political History that he is required to take. But he dutifully, if unenthusiastically, goes to the lecture hall where he thinks the final review session is going to take place. It takes him a while to realize that he had mistakenly entered the wrong room. Instead of the review of American Political History, he discovers that he is in the final session of a class on Advanced Tax Law. And so aimless, so passive is the young man, that upon discovering his mistake, he doesn't even bother to get up in order to find the room he is supposed to be in. He just stays there.

And then the most remarkable scene unfolds. A man in a crisp black suit walks into the classroom, who we later learn is a substitute for the regular professor. No one knows who he is. He is dressed meticulously, the black suit, with shined black shoes, with not a hair out of place. The substitute lines up his materials, and then he promptly begins his lecture, right on the hour, miraculously holding the attention of everyone in the room, including our narrator, but also including me, sitting there in Oxford, Mississippi.

Toward the end of the session, the substitute puts away his materials, and he begins to speak extemporaneously to the class, all of whom will shortly graduate, and many of whom will take up careers as accountants with the IRS. And here, begging your pardon, I wish to quote the substitute. He says to the assembled students:¹

¹ All of the following quotes are taken from David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King*, (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2011), pgs. 227-233.

“You will return to your homes and families for the holiday vacation and, in that festive interval before the last push of the CPA examination study...you will hesitate, you will feel dread and doubt. (You will hear) dolorous forecasts from your friends and family as to the sheer drudgery of the profession you are choosing.” He then continues, “To experience commitment as the loss of options, a type of death, the death of childhood’s limitless possibility, of the flattery of choice without duress - this will happen, mark me. Childhood’s end. The first of many deaths. Hesitation is natural. Doubt is natural.”

There in Square Books, in Oxford, Mississippi, I looked up, and I saw my very own child, Augie, moving toward my seat. He had found me. “Dad, how much longer?” he asked. “We’ve been here forever.” “We’ve been here 15 minutes,” I said. “I know, it’s forever,” Augie responded. “Ok, ok, just give me a few more minutes and I can be ready,” I told him, and then returned to the substitute’s exhortation, which, ironically, seemed then to be a kind of commentary upon what I was at that moment living - the summons toward a kind of responsibility. But nevermind. With hands clasped behind his back, the substitute goes on to tell the students of Advanced Tax Law:

“I wish to inform you that the accounting profession to which you aspire is, in fact, heroic. Exacting? Prosaic to the point of drudgery? Sometimes. Often tedious? Perhaps. But brave? Worthy? Romantic? Chivalric? Heroic?” Here the substitute paused for effect, before continuing. “Gentlemen, here is a truth: enduring tedium over real time in a confined space is what real courage is. Such endurance is, as it happens, the distillate of...heroism...You are now nearly at childhood’s end; you are ready for the truth’s weight, to bear it. The truth is that the heroism of your childhood entertainments was not true valor. It was theater. The grand gesture, the moment of choice, the mortal danger...it was all designed to excite and gratify an audience. An audience.” Here, the substitute paused once again. “Gentlemen, welcome to the world of reality - there is no audience. No one to applaud, to admire. No one to see you...Here is the truth - actual heroism receives no ovation, entertains no one. No one queues up to see it. No one is interested.”

I looked up from the book, and now I saw Elsa approaching. She too had found me. “Dad, it’s time to go,” she said. “Mom told me to tell you that we’ll be downstairs waiting.” “But does she not know that I’m at the very best part?” I responded. Elsa rolled her eyes and disappeared, while I hurriedly located the place on the page where the substitute had left off.

“True heroism,” he said, “is you alone, in a designated work space. True heroism is minutes, hours, weeks, year upon year of the quiet, precise, judicious exercise of probity and care - with no one there to see or cheer. This is the world. In fact,” the substitute continued, “the less conventionally heroic or exciting or adverting a labor appears to be, the greater its potential as an arena for actual heroism, and therefore as a denomination of joy unequaled by any you can yet imagine. To retain care and scrupulosity about each detail from within the teeming wormball of data and rule and exception that your vocation will require of you - this is heroism. Yea, to serve those who care not for service

but only for results - this is heroism. Routine, repetition, tedium, monotony, inconsequence, boredom, angst, ennui - these are the true hero's enemies, and make no mistake, they are fearsome indeed. For they are real."

And now it was Augie come to summon me one more time, come to literally pull me up from the chair, and to walk me down the stairs and out into the baking Mississippi sunlight. I got up, and moved to place the book back on the table from where I had found it. Standing there, just before walking away, I read the substitute's final words:

"You have wondered why all real accountants wear hats?" he asks. "They are today's cowboys. As will you be. Riding herd on the unending torrent of financial data. You order the data, shepherd it, direct its flow." Here the substitute raised his arms, in which he held an old grey business fedora, and then he said, "Gentlemen, you are called to account."

I put the book down and rejoined my family, idly wondering if I ought to enroll in accounting classes. I did not, it turns out. But I went away considering anew the Apostle Paul's words in I Corinthians: when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. The substitute, it seemed to me, had captured the essence of that transition from childhood to maturity in a way that approached the mystics. Confronting repetition, routine, monotony and ennui - which of us as a parent, say, has not had some glimmer of the existential void, as we wonder to ourselves amidst all the repetitions that come with parenting, "My God, what has become of my life?" Who among us has not at some point gone to work on yet another day, only to contend with the fearsome enemies that the substitute names - routine, monotony, ennui? And, let's bring this home - who among us has not felt, from time to time - though surely not now! - that church itself, and the very practice of faith in any community - is subject to the same cycle of repetitions and routines that the substitute names? I have, and I'll bet you have too.

Surely the substitute's words are meant for us. For we too have been taught to search out the grand gesture. We too long for those fate-filled moments of choice, confronting mortal danger, vanquishing evil through our own heroic efforts. And we too long for an audience. Some people deal with that longing by becoming influencers. Some people deal with that longing by hosting reality television shows. There are those who deal with it by running for political office. That is a way of remaining in a perpetual state of adolescence.

We have all been taught to desire such things, but mostly, what we are given is the repetition of our daily lives, in which we must show up day after day, performing tasks that receive neither attention nor applause. Let us say, with the substitute, that there is valor in learning to face the repetitions with the care that they require.

So too, in the life of faith we have been taught to value the dramatic moments of confrontation with the powers and principalities that rule us. But what we are actually given is the work of living out our faith in daily acts of care and generosity. What we are given is the work of sustaining a community such as this one, with all that it requires - our time, our finances, our imagination and our energy.

To pay attention to such things with the probity and care they deserve is, the substitute tells us, an act of heroism. But it is also an act of prayer. Devoted, sustained attention to the ordinary, sometimes monotonous, features of our days, is a kind of prayer. In this time of appalling self-regard, when greed, personal branding, enrichment, flattery, and the continual seeking of attention and applause have become public values, we all do well to heed the summons of the substitute to put an end to childish ways - for we are indeed called to account. We are invited into a form of prayerful attention.

And yet, it is not lost on me, as I trust it has not been lost on you, that in the midst of this great summons to adult responsibility - to prayer if you will - it was my children who summoned me. It was indeed a summons toward responsibility, but it was more than that. It was a summons toward play, toward togetherness, toward spontaneity and joy. I am not yet old, but I am growing older, and I find that the older I get, the more I need the help of others to exit the world of my adult responsibilities in order to experience that playfulness and joy. Perhaps it is necessary and good for a child to interrupt the substitute's words from time to time. Perhaps it is helpful now and then for a child to redirect us from the wisdom of the Apostle Paul, that we might become as children once again. It's why I've often said that if there are restless children making noise around us in church, such sounds might be far more important than anything the ministers might say. That too is a part of the summons toward maturity: to open ourselves to the bottomless play of the world, and of the Spirit that animates that world.

It was a dual summons that I received on that summer day in Mississippi: a summons to account, and a summons by my children to - in essence - come and play. It is a dual summons that we each receive in the life of faith.

But you have been listening long enough. It is time, I think, to let the world summon us forth. Amen.