

## **NOTICE WHAT YOU NOTICE**

### **Psalm 146**

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Doug and I were in Vancouver about ten days ago. I had a meeting at the Vancouver School of Theology, and we had time to explore the city. We noticed, from the moment we arrived, the gleaming blue glass high rises all over downtown. The population of the city is about 600,000 yet you feel as if you are in a much larger place, like Manhattan or Chicago. Many people live in the downtown area. The typical price for a single-family detached home in Vancouver is over a million dollars.

As we were walking around the streets of Vancouver, we noticed the huge population of people who are homeless - more than we have ever seen in any other city.

We enjoyed ourselves in Vancouver, but once we noticed the huge disparity between the very rich and the very poor, it changed our perception. We still appreciated the beauty of the water and the surrounding mountains, we had fun visiting the markets and artists' studios, but we were haunted by the poverty as well.

What we notice changes our experience. What we pay attention to shapes our reality.

The human mind is so much more powerful than we often realize. We make decisions about what we will focus on, and what we will ignore, and those decisions affect the course of our lives. Those decisions form our character.

We know that what we take into our bodies shapes who we are, physically. Very few people can spend a lifetime eating junk food and maintain a level of physical health. Breathing in secondhand smoke eventually affects our lungs.

The same is true for our intellects. What we read, what we watch, what we listen to contributes to either the expansion or the shrinking of our mental capacities.

And it's true for our spiritual growth as well. All of the images that enter our hearts and minds determine what kind of spiritual health we experience. If we choose to focus on everything that is wrong with the world, we will find ourselves bitter and angry, constantly railing our fists at God, shouting, "Why do you allow such evil and suffering?" If, instead, we choose to pay attention to all of the places where we see the power of love at work in the world, we will find ourselves full of gratitude, filled with awe at the good that is able to be accomplished despite great odds.

Those of you who were here last week saw, with your own eyes, and heard, with your own ears, examples of what happens when people live with hope, faith and determination. What Nancy Lott Henry and Anil Henry are able to do in India shows us that nothing is impossible when the work is begun in the right spirit.

What I love best about Anil is the joy he finds in his daily living. He uses the word "fun" in almost every paragraph. For him, challenges are fun. Dealing with quirky unpredictable people is fun. Solving problems is fun. He doesn't go about his work with grim-faced seriousness. He looks for opportunities to laugh and smile. His enthusiasm draws people to him, and they find themselves doing things that never would have imagined doing.

Now I realize that it isn't always easy to choose one's attitude. There are things that happen to us in this life that are downright unfair, frightening, painful. I'm not asking you to deny the reality of those experiences. There is a time for righteous anger. There is even a time for shaking our fists at God and asking, "Why?" Lament is a healthy and legitimate form of religious expression.

What I'm encouraging you to do is to realize that - most of the time - we have a choose about what we are taking in. We can decide what to focus on, what to pay attention to.

I wonder how different our country would be right now if all of us chose to be more empathetic, to truly try to walk in one another's shoes. How much more united would we be?

Have we tried to imagine what it's like to be a police officer? To go to work every day aware of the risks and dangers that await? What would it be like to be a police officer's loved one? Have white people tried to imagine what it's like to be a person of color? The obstacles that many face, just because of the color of one's skin or the sound of one's name? Have straight people imagined what it's like to be gay? Have those of us in the middle class every truly thought about what it would feel like to wake up after having slept in a shelter? Or in a car?

We don't often pay attention to other people's lives because it makes us feel uncomfortable, or sometimes it makes us feel guilty, but perhaps what our country most needs right now is an infusion of empathy that can only come when we choose to pay attention to the lives of those who are different than we are.

Psalm 146 is a description of God at work in the world. God is described as Creator: maker of heaven and earth and sea. Noticing all that God has created takes time and attention. Whenever possible, if I'm headed east, I'll take Lake Road instead of I-90. I don't drive slowly, I won't lie, but it's certainly a slower-paced drive than I-90. And there's time to notice. The beauty of the trees in every season. Glimpses of the lake, and of the downtown skyline. And as many thousands of times as I've made the drive, it seems I'm always noticing a different house. One night last week, driving home at dusk, I stopped for just a moment on Electric to look at the full moon. I believe that even those small moments of beauty feed our souls.

God is also described as the one who loves, who liberates, and who brings about justice. Psalm 146 says, "God keeps faith forever; executes justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, sets the prisoners free, opens the eyes of the blind, lifts up those who are bowed down, loves the righteous, watches over the strangers, upholds the orphan and the widow." This is what God's work in the world is like. Are we noticing? Are we paying attention?

Living a focused life is not about trying to feel happy all the time, which isn't practical or even spiritually healthy. Rather it's about treating your mind as you would a garden and being as careful as possible about what you introduce and allow to grow there.

When I spoke to the senior high youth while they were on their mission trip in Pennsylvania this summer, many of them said it was the best week of their summer. They were working hard, they had no TV, no video games, no shopping, but some of them said, "I don't want this week to end." So I said to them, "Notice how good you are feeling right now. Notice how it feels to be of service, to be actively involved in making someone else's life better." My hope is that they will want to keep those good feelings alive within them. Not every week can be a mission trip week, of course, but even simple acts of service can generate those good feelings. Noticing the people who seem to be lonely and left out and inviting them to sit with you at lunch. Smiling at someone in the hallway. Speaking up when someone is being belittled or made fun of. They're all acts of love, kindness and empathy. Noticing the way others feel and what you can do to make a difference for good. It all creates ripple effects.

Chances are, if you look back at a time in your life when you felt truly happy — not just a fleeting happiness - but a deep contentment and joy, it was probably a time when you were giving of yourself. Maybe it was raising children, maybe it was pouring yourself into work that you felt really made a difference, maybe it was a project that tapped your God-given creative talents. But chances are, it wasn't anything superficial. It wasn't a new car, it wasn't a promotion, it wasn't a soaring stock market. Notice what makes you feel the best about your life, notice what it is that makes you feel that you are your best, truest self.

God has given us an amazing capacity to adapt, to cope, to choose. We can't choose everything, of course. But we can choose how we react to everything - illness, grief, setbacks and failures, challenges.

There's a story that comes from Native American folklore that contains similar wisdom:

*One evening, an elderly Cherokee brave told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, 'My son, the battle is between two wolves inside us all.*

*One is evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.*

*The other wolf is good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.'*

*The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked, 'Grandpa, which wolf wins?'*

*The old Cherokee simply replied, 'The one that you feed.'*

Paying attention to and nurturing the good in us and in others changes our experience, and can indeed change the world God loves.

Holy God, wake us up when we act as if we're merely passing through this life; jolt us into awareness of the beauty you place in front of us, the opportunities we have to be of service, and the good we can help you bring into the world. In Jesus' name. Amen.