

“To Be”
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The first reading is from Exodus Chapter 24, verse 12:

The Lord said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and commands I have written for their instruction.”

The second reading is from Mark Chapter 10, verses 14 through 16:

He said to them, “let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.

One of my favorite days each year is the day during spring or summer that I notice all the different shades of green. The grass is a massive sea of Kelly green spires. There are forest green bushes and sage plants. Each individual leaf even seems to have its own shade, everything from moss, to olive to jade. It happens at different times and places each year, but it’s always on a bright sunny day. I think the reason I love this day so much is because on this day, I feel very present to the world around me. On this day I am in awe of nature and of God, because on this day, I actually spend time noticing what is around me and what is happening at this specific place and time in my life. On this day, I’m not worrying about how much I have to do later, or how excited I am about something that I’m going to be doing tonight. On this day, I am thrilled to be right where I am and right when I am.

Unfortunately, this kind of day doesn’t happen for me very often, and I’m guessing it doesn’t happen often for many people. School seems to add to this feeling of always thinking about next year instead of today. I remember my elementary school teachers saying that they were preparing us for middle school, my middle school teachers saying they were preparing us for high school, and my high school teachers saying they were preparing us for college. And of course we all know that college prepares us for the “real world.” What is the “real world” anyway? Why isn’t right now the “real world?” I think it is. Every experience and stage in life is just as important as any other for shaping us into who we are. Now is real, next year is real, elementary school was real, and 40 years from now will be real. So we should treat each day as if it actually matters.

When Jesus blesses the children in the passage from Mark, he doesn’t say “I’m blessing you now so you’re ready for 5th grade next year.” He blesses them just as they are right then. He knows that that moment, just the same as every other moment of their lives, will help to define them, so they should be happy with who they are then, not who they will be next year. I think one reason that Jesus loves children so much, and tells us we must be like them to enter the kingdom of God is because children live in the moment. They laugh and cry and play because of what is happening now, not because of what might happen. They don’t spend all their time planning or

worrying about tomorrow. They are able to see the world around them as it is, not as it might be or even as it should be. And in seeing that, they can see God.

A few years ago, the Washington Post did a study to see if people would actually stop for just a minute if there was something beautiful right in front of them. They decided to put a brilliant musician in a Washington DC subway station. On the morning of January 12th, 2007, Joshua Bell, one of the best musicians in the world, an artist who can command up to \$1,000 a minute, played some of the best violin literature ever written on one of the most valuable violins in existence right inside the L'Enfant Plaza Metro Station. In the 43 minutes that he played, almost eleven hundred people walked by, and only seven stopped to listen for at least one minute. Many didn't even notice because they were so focused on getting to work, or because they had headphones on to block out everything other than their chosen playlists. The journalists at the Washington Post learned several things from their experiment, but the observation I found most striking was that every single child who walked by pulled against his parent's arm, wanting to see and hear more. And every parent pulled his child away, probably not even acknowledging the beauty his young one instantly recognized. I'm sure each of these parents had a valid reason for wanting to hurry – they needed to be at work, or get their child to school. But was it worth it? Billy Collins once said that “all babies are born with a knowledge of poetry. Then life slowly starts to choke the poetry out of us.” What is life without poetry, music, beauty, blessing? Is all of our time spent planning the future worth it if it means we don't have time for the gifts of God?

Planning and having dreams and focus is not a bad thing, but it can be if it means forgetting about the importance of today. If we spend so much time thinking about later, then we're never fully present to our lives, our surroundings, or our God right here and now. In his video Everything is Spiritual, Rob Bell points out that in the passage from Exodus, the verb that is translated “to stay” actually means “to be.” So what God is really saying to Moses is “Come up on the mountain, and then be on the mountain.” Sounds a little redundant right? Where else is Moses going to be if he's standing on top of the mountain? But God knows that Moses is going to spend a lot of time and energy climbing up that mountain, and once he gets to the top, actually probably before he gets to the top, he's going to start thinking about how he's going to get back down. And in this process, he will never be fully present to God on top of that mountain. Can you imagine having the opportunity to meet God face to face, and passing it up because you were too focused on the challenges ahead? However, I think most of us do this just about every day. We don't notice the beautiful flower blooming next to the sidewalk. We use all sorts of things like shoes, headphones, and umbrellas to insulate ourselves from the world instead of exposing ourselves to it.

Many times we are so focused on the future, or so stuck in the past that we're never fully aware of who we are now. Sometimes I'll have an idea about what I want to do after I graduate and that's all I can think about. All I focus on for a while is how great that will be someday. What if I do all of this, and miss some clue right now that's telling me how to get there? What if I spend all my time on this dream and miss some sign right now that's telling me what I really want to do is something completely different?

One of my favorite theologians, Barbara Brown Taylor, helps me illustrate this point – “No one longs for what he or she already has, and yet the accumulated insight of those wise about the spiritual life suggests that the reason so many of us cannot see the red x that marks the spot is because we are standing on it. The treasure we seek requires no lengthy expedition, no expensive equipment, no superior aptitude or special company. All we lack is the willingness to imagine that we already have everything we need. The only thing missing is our consent to be where we are.” There it is again – we can see God when we decide TO BE.

Another point she makes in her book An Altar in the World is that “when someone asks us where we want to be in our lives, the last thing that occurs to us is to look down at our feet and say, ‘Here, I guess, since this is where I am.’” Why are we never content with where we are? Even if we achieve the position we always wanted, we may be happy for a few days, or even a few months, but eventually, we want something more or at least something different. This reminds me of a kid I met one time who was working at a gas station or a fast food restaurant. I don’t remember when or where it was, but I noticed that he seemed excited to be working that day, even though gas station or fast food employee doesn’t usually seem like an ideal job. I said something about it and he said with a smile “If I have to be here, I might as well be here.” What a great attitude to have! This is someone who probably wasn’t where he wanted to be for the rest of his life, but he was living life as it was, and because of that, he was having a much better time with it than any of his co-workers who were, I’m sure, just waiting for the day they could move on to a better job.

So what does it look like to be more present to now? I think it’s a person who sees what is really around her, both the good and the bad. It’s a person who notices the poverty, the injustice, and the pollution in the world, and works to right these wrongs, but who is also able to see and appreciate that there are some wonderful things in our world. It’s a person who is able to plan, but only because she is able to take hints about her future from what she sees and feels today. Maybe a good practice for learning to live in the present is to remove some of our physical insulators sometimes. Walk barefoot through the grass. You’ll be much more attentive to where you are stepping when you can actually feel your surroundings. You’ll notice the sticks on the ground, and the dozens of ants carrying a leaf across the lawn. You’ll notice a small flower that ended up far from the garden. You’ll notice creation.

When we are not solely focused on where we want to be, and instead allow ourselves to just be where we are, allow ourselves to take an active role in the journey that is bringing us somewhere, we can see God. We can see what blessings God has given us. A lyric from one of my favorite bands goes: “I guess, I am blessed, but sometimes it’s just hard to see it as such.” It’s not hard to believe that if all we can think about is what we want to achieve or have in the future, or what life was like in the old days, we can miss the blessing of today. When we spend time actually focusing on our journey rather than where the journey will get us, we can notice the beauty and the blessing of that journey. We can notice the shades of green. We can notice life.

So, where I want to be in my life is at Augustana College, at the end of the first week of my last year here. No, I’m not ready for graduation yet, I’m ready for today. On May 21, 2011, I’ll be ready for graduation.