

“A New Assignment”  
Matthew 10:1-8a  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

June 14, 2026  
Westminster, Greenville  
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I’m going to begin this morning with what I hope is an easy question:

Who, or what, are you paying attention to right now?

As soon as I ask that, let me clarify:  
I don’t mean *me*.

You may be listening to me, but that’s not the level of attention that I’m talking about.

I mean—what is it,  
or who is it—  
in your head, or in your heart,  
that has your attention at this moment?

Maybe some of you are soccer fans, and with the rousing U.S. victory on Friday evening, your attention is on the World Cup, could this be the year that the United States does something remarkable in the World Cup?

Perhaps, for those parents who have young children with you, perhaps it’s your restless child sitting next you that has your attention... and you feel a bit nervous at this moment because you are convinced your child is going to disturb someone else, sitting in the pew in front of you or behind you. Don’t be nervous. Every parent who has ever attended church knows what you are going through.

I've told some of you before that when our children were much younger, but old enough to be in worship, my wife would sometimes play hangman with them during worship to keep them occupied.

So...you know what phrase one of my kids spelled out for his mother to guess?

**Church is boring.**

Where is your attention right now?

Maybe it's not on your child, maybe you're thinking about a friend of your child's. Your daughter is a teenager, and her friend, she doesn't always make good decisions, but her friend's home life is a mess, her parents are not stable, so you don't want your daughter to abandon that friend, but you're worried about your daughter, and you're worried about her friend...

Maybe your attention is on your own life, at the moment. Because you feel slightly overwhelmed right now. And there seems to be no end to the curveballs life is throwing you right now.

*What is it—  
who is it—  
that you are paying attention to?*

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I ask all this because the question of attention is central to our texts for today. In the first passage that you heard this morning, Matthew writes:

“When he [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’”

Do you see what Jesus is doing this morning?  
He’s SHIFTING his disciples’ attention.

He’s giving them a new assignment, if you will.  
Don’t just listen to me and follow me and go where I go.  
Go out there!  
Go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel!

Listen to them. Sit next to them.  
Bring the good news of God’s grace to them.

That, Jesus says, is where I want your attention.

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When was the last time you stepped back, and thought to yourself,  
where does Jesus want MY attention these days?

After all, attention can be a funny thing.  
An unpredictable thing...

The columnist Nicholas Kristof has received two Pulitzer Prizes in his career, one of which was awarded for his writings on the genocide in Darfur that took place a little over two decades ago. But those columns on genocide, he said, were a frustrating experience.

Why?

As Kristof puts it:

“I’d go out to Darfur and I’d see these villages burned down, [people] massacred...and I would write these columns and it just felt like they were disappearing into the pond without a ripple.

“In the meantime, at more or less the same time in New York...there was a red-tailed hawk named Pale Male that got pushed out of his nest...he was living in a condo building on Central Park. He was evicted by the building, and New Yorkers were just up in arms about this homeless red-tailed hawk.

“And I was sort of frustrated I couldn’t get the same reaction for hundreds of thousands of people being driven out of their homes as for one red-tailed hawk.”<sup>1</sup>

Have you ever considered the kinds of things that determine where our attention goes?

How do we make decisions—  
consciously, or unconsciously—  
about who or what we give our attention to?

Just last week, a study out of Great Britain issued a report about how much time the average Briton will spend doomscrolling in their lifetime. What do you think the answer is?

According to the study...nearly FIVE YEARS!<sup>2</sup>  
And it’s not just the younger generations.  
It’s also my generation.

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<sup>1</sup> From an interview with Krista Tippet, “Journalism and Compassion,” on her podcast “On Being,” February 9, 2012, found at <http://www.onbeing.org/program/transcript/1914>.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Ellizabeth Lynn & Mark Ramsey’s essay, “Intention,” from The Ministry Collaborative, June 11, 2026 for calling my attention to this study.

*“Doomscrolling is an intergenerational habit,”* notes the study.

*“People aged 16 to 24 spend 44 percent of their time on smartphones unintentionally, followed by 45 to 54-year-olds at 42 percent.”*<sup>3</sup>

God help me if I get to the end of my life, and God says, “Ben, you’ve had a good life—but what’s with that 5 years you spend on your iPhone?”

The key word in that study...is UNINTENTIONALLY.  
So today, Jesus gets very intentional.  
He redirects his disciples’ attention.  
He sends his disciples on a mission.

“Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

It’s not a mission to go back and tell their families all about their new life with Jesus.

It’s not even a mission to invite their friends to join them on their journey with Jesus.

**It’s a mission to the stranger.**

To go out into their own neighborhood, and reach out to neighbors they do not know...

Now I don’t know about you, but in my book, the stranger...may just be the hardest person to pay attention to these days. It becomes easy

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<sup>3</sup> Found at [Doomscrolling: is it really worth five years of your one wild and precious life? | Social media | The Guardian](https://www.thetimes.com/uk/technology-uk/article/average-briton-doomscrolling-smartphone-usage-3slgrmzpw) and <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/technology-uk/article/average-briton-doomscrolling-smartphone-usage-3slgrmzpw>.

to ignore people when they are simply statistics, numbers, categories that are too overwhelming for our minds to comprehend.

The International Rescue Committee sent me a text this week:

“...conditions in Gaza are deteriorating at an alarming pace. Collapsed sanitation systems [and] extreme overcrowding...are exposing civilians to disease and further suffering...But this crisis is being forgotten as the world’s attention shifts elsewhere.”

That’s what the text said, but when I received the text—I saw that it was not from family or friend or any one of you—so what did I do?

I swiped right by it because I had other things to do.

It’s so much easier to stick to our silos, take care of our families, gravitate toward friends...

And yet, what Jesus is saying today is that we cannot faithfully follow him—unless some portion of our attention  
   is outside of our silos,  
   away from our comfort zone,  
   and devoted to the stranger...

Now some of you may be thinking, don’t we already do some of that at Westminster?

Of course we do.

Allow me to introduce you to line 541505 in our operating budget.

It’s a line that constitutes a modest portion of the money we give away in our Witness & Service budget. And through that line item, we send funds to World Relief Upstate.

Here's the kind of thing that World Relief does.

Julie — an empty nester with a busy work schedule — felt called to offer something she had in abundance: a safe, welcoming space in her condo where newcomers could begin to rebuild their lives.

Recalling her own housing struggles two decades earlier, Julie said: "I just felt like God was saying, 'How can you use this extra space?'"

Through World Relief, Julie began welcoming refugees...

Her first guest was Amani, newly arrived from Syria. Amani was facing the steep challenge of finding housing with no rental history and limited income.

Julie offered more than a room — she offered dignity, shared meals with this stranger, and turned this stranger into a friend. "I had a few worries about moving in with someone I had never met before," Amani said. "But I approached it with an open mind, and it turned out to be a positive experience of building new connections."

Roughly 6,000 miles away, a Ukrainian woman named Alla was serving her church and community when the 2022 Russian invasion changed everything overnight. With her family urging her to flee, Alla crossed borders, prayed for safety, and endured 18 difficult days in U.S. detention.

"I prayed for God to open doors, and he did," Alla said. Through a friend, she connected with World Relief and then with Julie.

Alla is an event coordinator by profession, and now that she's resettled, she spends her time working as a florist for weddings and other special occasions.

So when a friend of Julie's was about to have a baby shower and needed a floral design, Julie knew just who to call. She reached out to Alla — and who do you think that baby shower was for?

It was for Amani, who had resettled from Syria. She and her husband were expecting their third child.

“It's...a...connect-the-dots story,” Jane said.  
“...connecting the dots that God put together.”<sup>4</sup>

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Have you ever seen God connect the dots before?

Some of you here have friendships in this very room that go back 20 or 30 or 40 years...get one of those friends in your mind at this moment. Can you remember the time, when that friend was a stranger to you?

And God connected the dots for you?

Have you ever seen what God can do through the stranger?

The Bible is insistent on this:

**“When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself...”**

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<sup>4</sup> “From Shelter to Celebration, a Refugee Community Connection Blossomed,” found at [From Shelter to Celebration, a Refugee Community Connection Blossomed | World Relief](#).

That's Leviticus 19:33.

**“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”**

That's Hebrews 13:2.

Or as Jesus says, later on in Matthew's Gospel:

**“I was a stranger, and you welcomed me...”**

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Speaking of connecting dots, one of my favorite stories about the stranger took place back in the summer of 1990. *The Boston Globe* wrote about a woman and her fiancé. They needed to plan their wedding banquet. So they went to the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston to make the necessary arrangements.

They pored over the menu.

They selected china and silver.

They chose the right flowers.

The bill came to \$13,000.

After leaving a check for half that amount as a down payment, the couple went home to flip through their book of wedding announcements.

The day that the announcements were supposed to hit the mail, the groom said to his fiancé, “I'm just not sure. Let's think about this a little longer.”

NOT what the fiancé wanted to hear.

When she went back to the Hyatt to cancel the banquet, the Events Manager was VERY understanding. “The same thing happened to me, honey,” she said.

But when it came to the refund, the manager had bad news:

“The contract is binding. You’re only entitled to \$1,300 back. You have two options: to forfeit the rest of the down payment, or go ahead with the banquet. I’m sorry. I really am.”

Now the more the jilted bride thought it over, the more she liked the idea of going ahead with the party. Not a wedding banquet, but a big blowout. And who would come to the party?

It just so happened that 10 years before all this, the bride had been living in a homeless shelter for a brief portion of her life. She’d managed to get back on her feet, found a good job, and set aside a nest egg for herself. So now...with no wedding to celebrate...she had the wild notion of using her savings to treat the down-and-outs of Boston to a night on the town.

And so it was that in June of 1990, the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston hosted a party such as no one at the hotel had ever seen before. The hostess changed the menu to “boneless chicken”—“in honor of the groom,” she said—and she sent invitations to rescue missions and homeless shelters in Boston.

That warm summer evening, people who were used to eating half-gnawed pizza from trash bins were served chicken cordon bleu by Hyatt waiters in tuxedos, and danced to big-band melodies late into the night.<sup>5</sup>

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I mean, that bride was on a mission!

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<sup>5</sup> Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.

It doesn't sound too far from the mission on which Jesus sent his disciples long ago. And when Jesus sent them on their mission, he gave them NEW AUTHORITY, right?

To cure the sick, raise the dead,  
cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons.

It makes me wonder...

What if the most demonic part of our society today is the way that so many people are getting in the habit of dehumanizing and disregarding the stranger?

What if Jesus wants his church to do something about that?

Take out your phone right now.  
From your pocket, from your purse, take it out.

If you decided today that you're going to take 50% of the time that you spend on your phone every month, and you are going to devote that phone time...to in-person time...

to reaching out to the stranger,  
to building relationships with strangers...  
what dots might God connect through you?

(Amen.)