

One thing we're doing in our weekly spiritual practices is learning how to pray.

The scriptures teach us how to pray largely by telling us: Try this! There are 150 prayers in the middle of the Bible. They're called Psalms, and they encourage us to pay attention to what we're thinking and feeling and experiencing - all of it - and to say it to God, while remembering what we think God is like, and asking God to do something. The psalms tell us to pay attention to ourselves and open ourselves, open our hearts and minds to God, however we are today.

Today let's look at the other side of paying attention. How do we learn to pay attention to God? In prayer, after all, we are seeking by faith to be with an unseen God who is here with us. We are wanting to relate to a God who loves us.

So today, I want to ask, in a world that doesn't think about God very often, and that is full of distraction, how can we learn to pay attention to God, and perhaps even in our paying attention, to even love God.

I was reminded recently that one way to pay more attention to God is to learn to just pay more attention to any one thing or person that delights us. This is at the heart of love, after all, to pay attention to someone, to delight in and enjoy them. Since we live in distracted times, and because we're probably mostly out of practice paying attention to God, in today's spiritual practice, we'll pay attention to a delightful object and then practice it with God.

You can practice paying attention lots of ways - by taking a slow walk with no music or podcasts on and just looking at what's around you, by doing any activity you enjoy, and just doing that one thing - dancing, reading, singing, shooting a basketball, solving a puzzle, you get the idea. Today we'll practice by looking at a fascinating object.

I have with me a little clementine, because citrus fruits are widely available and they are fascinating a delightful. Look with me.

The skin.

The peeling.

The fruit.

The taste.

And now let's try for a moment with God.

Close your eyes if you are willing. The scriptures and the person of Jesus tells us God is love, and one of their favorite words for that love is a Hebrew word, "chesed." Chesed means loving-kindness, steadfast love, compassion, mercy. When Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy," he's talking about chesed. When he says God loves

mercy, he's talking about chesed. When the psalms say, "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases," the word is chesed.

Meditate with me for a moment on the God who is chesed.

Chesed's root means "strong desire." God, what does it mean that have strong desire, that in some sense you are strong desire? You are made of feeling, longing, desire.

Chesed speaks of desire colored by pleasure and joy and delight. God, what does it mean that you love everything you made? That you look at this universe in its vastness, that you look at citrus fruits and fall leaves and earthy mud with pleasure and joy? What do you look like, God, when you are paying attention? What does your smile look like?

Chesed tells us God is like this with living creatures, that God enjoys and feels for all life. God, we understand, is especially smitten with human life. God sees something like God in us. What do you love about me right now, God? What are you fond of? What other people are you thinking about right now, caring about, enjoying, hoping for?

Chesed tells us that when struggle, when we have sorrow or difficulty, God is always with us - never giving up, there to hold and encourage and strengthen. God, you feel for us. You feel with us. You have compassion, empathy, kindness, affection for us even in our weaknesses and struggles.

What do you have to share with us right now?

What are you wanting to give us?

How are you wanting to love us?

To encourage us?

To hold us?

To strengthen us?

Our God of love, we're going to give our attention now to what Ivy has prepared for us. But thank you again for being with us and loving us. Teach us, God, to be still. Teach us to pay attention. Help us learn to love you, and to stay with you while you love us. Amen.