Whenever I have a new book come out, I have to do radio interviews. This past Tuesday I was being interviewed by a fundamentalist Christian who had taken exception to several issues in the book and spent our half-hour together quoting the Bible to me. Fortunately, I have read the Bible, it being a useful text for Christian ministers, so was prepared to discuss it, except he wouldn’t let me. He’d ask a question, then as I began to answer it, he would interrupt and quote another Bible verse. It was very annoying, and at one point I thought of excusing myself and hanging up, but I hung in there to the end. Just when I get to thinking writing books is a glamorous business, something like this happens and puts everything in perspective.

Isn’t it frustrating when you’re talking with someone and they are so committed to their point of view, they won’t listen to yours? Or they ignore you or fail to pay attention to what you’re saying. When Cindy Vidal drove a carful of teenagers up to Quaker Haven Camp last Sunday, the teens had to surrender their phones and Ipods before leaving because the camp wants them to pay attention to the teachers. I watched as they handed over their electronics to Beth Sotkiewicz. It was a sight to behold. People having to communicate the old-fashioned way, using speech.
I’d like to think that by the end of the week they began to appreciate how nice it was to have someone’s full attention. The other evening Joan walked into my office and said, “I need to talk with you about something.” So I turned from my computer, but picked up my cell phone and began texting Spencer while Joan was speaking, which at the moment seemed like a wise use of time, though I soon learned otherwise.

When I was taking counseling classes, I was taught the three biggest things couples fight over were money, sex, and power. The big three—money, sex, and power. So I was surprised to hear people say, when they would talk to me about their marriages, “He doesn’t pay attention to me anymore.” Or “She doesn’t listen to me like she used to.” There is in each of us a deep need, a profound desire, to be listened to, to be heard, to have someone else’s full and undivided attention.

We’ve been focusing on the lesser-known qualities of Jesus. We’ve talked about his healthy skepticism of religious and societal institutions, and his personal integrity without regard for the judgment and opinion of others. Last week, we thought about his willingness to acknowledge virtue wherever he found it. Today, I would like to reflect upon the careful attention Jesus gave to those around him.
Our Scripture reading this morning was the story of the blind man begging alongside the road near Jericho, whom Jesus notices and heals. I remember hearing a sermon on that story once, where the preacher said the heart of the story were the words, “And immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus.” I will admit there is a certain power to those words, but for me the most compelling words in that story have always been, “And Jesus stopped.”

If you ever wanted to know what kind of person Jesus was, you can find it in those three words, “And Jesus stopped.” A multitude, a crowd, walked past this man, but Jesus stopped. He noticed what others overlooked.

New Testament scholars have categorized the stories about Jesus into separate genres. There are nativity stories, teaching stories, miracle stories, passion stories, and so on. This story is typically classified as a miracle story. But if I were running the show, I would create a whole new category for stories, put this one in that group, and call them attention stories. If you’ve been reading the gospels, by now you’ve noticed there are all kinds of attention stories. Times when Jesus stopped and paid significant attention to someone the multitude had overlooked—the woman who had bled for 12 years, the man at the pool of Bethzatha who had been ill for 38 years, the woman at the well.
These were people whose suffering and need had made them anonymous to others, but Jesus noticed them and stopped.

I was having dinner with my publisher several months ago. We were talking about some of the people he had worked with over the years, well-known and widely-admired people like Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama.

I asked him, “What were they like in person?”

He said, “They were just like you would think.”

Afterwards, I was walking back to my hotel, thinking about Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama, thinking how wonderful it would be to be like them, when a young man came up to me and said, “I'll sing a song for you for a dollar.”

I was too busy thinking about my spiritual piety, so I waved him away and kept on walking.

This man wasn’t asking for a free handout. He was selling me a song. Pavarotti sold songs to people and we admired Pavarotti. But I just waved this guy away, didn’t pay any attention to him.

Did you hear about the famous violinist Joshua Bell? He was in Washington D.C. in January of 2007, giving a concert that people paid a hundred dollars to attend. While he was there The Washington Post was doing research on the perceptions and priorities of people.
They sent Joshua Bell down into the subway to play his violin. He played 45 minutes. One of the best musicians in the world played six of the world’s most lovely and difficult pieces of music on a $3.5 million Stradivarius violin in the Washington D.C. subway. 1,097 people walked by, 27 of them gave Bell their pocket change without stopping to listen. They just threw their change in a box and kept on walking. Guess how many people stopped to listen? Seven.

How could that happen? How could 1,090 folks walk by the world’s finest violin player and not stop to listen? Perception. You put Joshua Bell in a symphony hall and we’ll dress up, hire a babysitter, drive an hour into the city, and pay a hundred dollars to hear him. But put Joshua Bell in a subway and percieving he has nothing of value to offer, we won’t see him.

You know when you really start noticing people? When you believe they have value. That’s why Jesus saw people others overlooked. He believed they had value.

About 20 years ago, I had the opportunity to be present at a talk given by a well-known writer. Coincidentally, I happened to be near the door when she arrived and was being greeted by those in charge of the event.
One of the hosts took her by the elbow to show her to a private room so she wouldn’t be swamped by her many fans. As they passed me, I overheard the host say to the writer, “There’s a man here who is a real annoyance. I’m going to steer you away from him so he won’t dominate your time.”

She asked where the man was, and the host discreetly pointed him out. I followed his gesture and noticed a man sitting by himself, avoided by everyone. She slipped from the grasp of her host, walked over to the man in question, sat beside him and began engaging him.

I was aware of the man’s story. He had lost his wife several years before and had become something of a pariah since then because of his emotional neediness and his tendency to glom onto others. I had been avoiding him myself. The writer placed her hand on his shoulder and they began visiting. I couldn’t hear what was being said, but he was speaking intently and she was paying close attention to him, to the annoyance of the host, who wanted to get her away from the man. Several minutes passed before she hugged the man, offered him a word of encouragement, then said good-bye. By then, I was close enough to hear her say, “It was an honor to meet you. God’s peace to you, friend.”

Multitudes hurry past. Few pay attention. Jesus saw the people others overlooked. As his followers let us do the same.