I’ll readily confess that my palate is about as sophisticated as a *Honk if You Love Jesus* bumper sticker in a seminary parking lot. Though I will say that I have passed by many interstate exits when I could not stomach the thought of eating at the fast food offerings noted on those important blue *Food This Exit* signs, so I’m at least that discriminating. Yet, when it comes to taste, I often find that there is an inverse relationship between the price and my excitement about the menu. I Googled a highly praised Charlotte restaurant and one of the first items on the menu was described as follows: *Grilled Mediterranean Octopus with Haricots Verts, Chick Peas, Olives, Oven Roasted Tomatoes and Lemon-Caper Vinaigrette.* Octopus? Sounds like the Clampets added seafood to their diet.

We recently watched the movie, *Burnt*, the story of a poorly recovering, egomaniacal, pot-throwing, expletive shrieking chef in search of that coveted third Michelin Star. You know, nothing whets your appetite like the smell of a good tire. Anyway, the Michelin star is the holy grail for a chef, and it was fascinating to watch the chef’s
obsessive compulsive attention to detail in preparing exorbitant, artistically displayed meals that took up far too little space on the plate. But surprisingly, the glorious epicurean display failed to leave me hungry when the credits rolled. By the end of *Diners, Drive-ins, and Dives* I’m ready to gas up the car and drive to Portland. And yet, there is a reason that such maniacal, *Michelin* chefs justify their prices. Quite simply, the demand is there and the reservations remain hard to come by.

What for you constitutes a grand dining experience when you go out to eat? I would put our experience a week ago on the list. We met friends at a Charlotte landmark in the South End and found the menu inspiring as we labored over what to order. The waiter was personable, patient, kind, attentive, and helpful, and I confidently placed my order without tripping over the pronunciation: “Cheeseburger with fries and could you put in the order for a chocolate shake so that it will arrive when I’m halfway through the burger?” And he got it! He completely understood the concept of experiencing the unique pleasure of chasing a cheeseburger bite with a sip of milkshake while leaving enough shake to savor as dessert.
Yet, whether your entrée comes with mustard or Citrus-Miso Emulsion; or whether your menu offers French fries or pommes frites, very often, your dining experience is defined by the service. Does the server look you in the eye, acknowledging you as a living, breathing human being worthy of attention and care, and not just an impediment on the production line delaying closing time? Does the server smile, offer help with the menu? Is the server attentive to your needs, patient, kind, thoughtful? Does the server leave you believing that you actually matter? It makes a huge difference in the experience, doesn’t it? In the same way, this kind of attentive service transforms your experience in the dry cleaner, the grocery store, the clothing boutique, or the auto repair shop.

And many here will tell you what a monumental difference this kind of service means in a hospital. Have you ever been in a children’s hospital? Over the years I have visited a good percentage of the hospitals from Chapel Hill to Asheville, and I’ve been repeatedly impressed by the nursing care in the children’s wing - to see how well they engage their patients, care for their patients, attend to their patients, be fully present for their patients, even honor their patients.
In our Bible study this week we talked about how hospitals must pay particular attention to the personalities they recruit for pediatrics. A child in their care may feel rotten, but cannot help but also feel acknowledged, affirmed, attended to, and known.

And isn’t that the most basic of human needs? To be known, to be heard, to be acknowledged that you are valued and are worth someone’s time. Isn’t that what erodes your loneliness, ends your isolation, breathes life into your spirit? I don’t care how self-sufficient you have deluded yourself into thinking you are, at some level, you too, know what it means to be known, to be seen, to be valued, to experience someone being fully present to you.

So, why wouldn’t we be ever vigilant in granting these precious jewels to others?

In our text today, Jesus is walking ahead of the disciples on the road toward Jerusalem. And for the third time in three chapters, Mark’s Jesus tries to tell his disciples what will transpire upon their arrival in Jerusalem. “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they
will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; 34 they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again."

Now, some 2000 years later, it’s as if we’re watching Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* for the umpteenth time, biting our nails and shouting at Grace Kelly, “Don’t go in that apartment!!” We know the threat that lies ahead, and cannot understand why the characters don’t sense the danger. If I’m on a trip with someone, and he says, “The bridge up ahead is out and I’m going to die,” I’m thinking I’d stop the car. Let’s think about this for a moment, Jesus; maybe come up with an alternate route. But *in the moment, on the journey* we may not hear the warning, sense the danger. Oh Jesus, quit being a drama queen. We’ll be fine.

*In the moment* we may be distracted. Think about it, when you are driving behind another car and that car is slow and wandering over the lane lines, or sitting still under the green light, or completely clueless to the fact that it cut you off, what do you think is going on in that car? Talking on the phone – distracted, oblivious to the people or the environment around them.
And how often in life are we so focused on our agendas, our schedules, our importance, our wants, that we fail to be present to the world around us and the people right in front of us?

James and John are certainly within earshot of Jesus, the sound waves of his warnings penetrated their ears, but distracted, they did not assimilate the sounds their ears picked up.

“I’m going to be crucified.” “Sure Jesus, whatever, but when we get to Jerusalem, we’re assuming you will take over the place. I mean, you’re Jesus. Emperor Jesus, that has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it? So, when you usurp the Roman rule, you will give us positions on your cabinet, right? Secretary of Chariots, maybe?”

When you are focused on your agenda, on your vision, on your desired destination, on your schedule, to what are you not paying attention? The people right in front of you.

“James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Isn’t that our approach to prayer? I think this is where Jesus rolls his eyes and sighs deeply. Jesus said to them, "What is it you want me to
do for you?” 37 And they said to him, ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.’ 38 But Jesus said to them, ‘You do not know what you are asking.’” Now that’s an understatement. When we read that phrase again, *one on his right and one on his left*, the emcee is introducing the next act, a crucifixion. So yes, they do not know what they are asking. You want those seats? You’d be like the guy about to be ridden out of town on a rail. “If it weren’t for the honor of the thing, I’d just as soon walk.”

James and John resemble the passenger riding shotgun through the Linville Gorge with her head buried in her phone. Wearing the blinders and earbuds that limit their senses to the tiny world of their own agendas and wants, they remain blind and deaf to the main thing: the voices, joys, needs, cries, and wonders that are all around them. In Proverbs it is written, “Hear, for I will speak noble things, and from my lips will come what is right;” The bluegrass bard sings, “Keep your lamps trimmed and burning. See what the Lord has done.” You just cannot approach wholeness until you humble yourself before and be present to the particular world into which you were born and in which you live.
Jesus said, “"You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 43 But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. 45 For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.”

You know what it means when the server at the restaurant, or the professor in college, or the uncle you cherish, or the physician at the clinic, or the spouse who shares your life, or the parent you idolize ... you know what it means when they are fully present to you, when you can tell they are listening to you, when you know that you are known and valued.

I once had the greatest doctor. Yes, she was smart as a whip, highly competent, and thorough. But you know what separated her from the rest. When she was with you, she was always fully present to you. She listened to you intently and she thought about what you said. She didn’t enter the exam room with one foot already out the door to the next appointment. You know, she was regularly harassed by the efficiency experts who wanted her to see you as a package to be quickly
checked and speedily shuffled along like a box on the conveyor at Fed Ex. She eventually left that type of practice. Such is the world in which agendas are valued more highly than people and goals are more important than needs.

A servant spirit isn’t a docile, subservient, and superficially interested presence. Rather, a servant spirit is one who sees the person in front of you, listens to the person in front of you, senses the actual needs of the person in front of you, values the person in front of you. “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.” You know what it means to be recognized, valued, known. You know what it means to matter in someone’s eyes. Why wouldn’t we want to treat everyone that way? Amen.