

Transcript: The Weight Podcast
["Reading the Times" with Jeff Bilbro](#)

Chris McAlilly 00:00 Hi, I'm Chris McAlilly.

Eddie Rester 00:01

And I'm Eddie Rester. Welcome to The Weight.

Chris McAlilly 00:03

Today we're talking to Jeffrey Bilbro.

Eddie Rester 00:06

Jeffrey's written a great book named "Reading the Times." And it's an opportunity for us to just stop and think about how we're engaging the world, how we're receiving information and news now, and what that constant flood of information is not only doing to us, but what it's doing to our relationships, in our families, and to our churches as well.

Chris McAlilly 00:29

Yeah. How's TikTok affecting you today, Eddie?

Eddie Rester 00:32

You know, I haven't haven't looked at TikTok today. But I'm sure this evening at some point, I will. But I mean, you're joking with me, I know. But TikTok is one of that constant flood for all of us. We're getting our news, our information. We're getting opinions masquerading as news and news masquerading as opinions. And that's coming at us in a lot of ways that we're not able to really sort through or think about. And I think what Jeff gets at in his book is maybe we shouldn't have to worry so much about that, or at least consider it in a different way.

Chris McAlilly 01:09

Yeah, we think of the digital era as introducing some fundamentally new dynamics. But one of the things that Jeff does is he roots this, or I guess grounds it in a longer trajectory. He talks about Henry David Thoreau who warned about the increased abundance and speed of the news that threatened to fragment our attention and damage our ability to see what's really going on. That's only increased in the last 100 and, you know, 30, 40, 50 years. And I think that, you know, we don't just talk about what's wrong, we have a lot of constructive conversation here about maybe some things that you can try, if you want to kind of reorient your attention.

Eddie Rester 01:51

Yeah, I think how we think constructively about this, I think it's an important moment, as we're moving, you know, into this new world. Post pandemic, how do we begin to put things back together maybe in a healthy way? How can we pull back on some habits and institute others? I loved that he talked about walking we lately. My wife, Audra and I, we've been doing a whole lot of walking in the evenings. And

it's been grand. There's one family we've gotten to know. This dad who walks his dog and his three kids every night, so we've gotten to know them simply because we're all outdoors and not because we're scrolling through our news feeds.

Chris McAlilly 02:37

Yeah, most of it's, you know, get off your phone and get into... It's the thing you need to do anyway, get off your phone and get into your local community in different ways through crafts, through walking, through engaging in play. I think that was one of the things that I wasn't anticipating that I thought it was really interesting that perhaps we build community around serious matters or political matters, and maybe playing pickleball or playing on church softball team or just some local forms of communal life that are centered around something a little bit less serious, actually serving us in ways that are maybe building up the social common good in ways that we're not perceiving.

Eddie Rester 03:21

One time when Audra are in counseling, the counselor basically told us go have fun conversations. He said, because once you've mastered the ability to have some fun conversations you're going to be able to have important conversations. I think that the ability to pull back from the deluge of information and attend to the people around us, I think prepares to have important conversations rather than the news telling us go have an important conversation.

Chris McAlilly 03:54

Yeah, that's it. This was a good one. And it's a part of an ongoing series called Reading and Contemplation. If you are just, you know, finding the podcast, we're glad that you're here. Go back and listen to the series. And we do a lot of series. You can go back and look at the backlog. If you really like it, you could share it with someone. You can leave us a review. We're always glad to, to have you with us on The Weight.

Eddie Rester 04:17

[INTRO] Life can be heavy. We carry around with us the weight of our doubt, our pain, our suffering, our mental health, our family system, our politics. This is a podcast to create space for all of that.

Chris McAlilly 04:31

We want to talk about these things with humility, charity, and intellectual honesty. But more than that, we want to listen. It's time to open up our echo chamber. Welcome to The Weight. [END INTRO]

Chris McAlilly 04:46

We're here today with Jeffrey Bilbro. Do you like to go by Jeff or Jeffrey?

Jeff Bilbro 04:53

Doesn't matter. Most people call me Jeff, but I don't really care.

Chris McAlilly 04:56 We'll call you Jeff.

Eddie Rester 04:57

It's our second time to have Jeff on the podcast. We should know what to call him by now.

Chris McAlilly 05:01

Thank you for that, Eddie. We're excited to talk to you today, Jeff about this book, "Reading the Times: A Literary and Theological Inquiry into the News." One of the things that you say right off the bat is that you want to delve into and help us think about how we consume the news. When did that become... What motivated kind of that engagement for you?

Jeff Bilbro 05:31

Yeah, well, I think I say in the book at some point that I write the books I need to read, and I think I noticed in myself a tendency toward kind of reading things, and then I would think, why am I attending to this story? Why am I paying attention to this? Why am I reading one more essay about this topic? And so that was part of my motivation to think about how should I spend my time and attention? And what should I be reading? And then also, as a teacher, I interact a lot with, you know, college students, and try to help them wrestle with these questions. And so part of my motivation was, what would I tell my students about how to direct their attention, about how to put together a healthy reading diet? And what role should the news and online media play in a good Christian reading regime?

Chris McAlilly 06:34

Yeah, in the background, it's not just about reading the news, it really is about kind of how you think about shaping your habit of it. And it really is, I found it to be really helpful in thinking about what are the ways in which my attention is almost like a muscle that's either being shaped in unhealthy directions, or ones that are not as good. And you actually use kind of the food analogy quite a bit. Junk food, you know, there are better and worse things to consume. I guess it's not as much exercise as just kind of consumption, just kind of exploring the ways in which we consume ideas, and we consume food, and we can consume better and worse things. Yeah, I wonder if you could just talk through, you know, there are several different ways in which you explore the idea of attention, but maybe you could just start with Thoreau.

Jeff Bilbro 07:39

Yeah, and you're right to think or to liken it to a muscle. You know, we get the power of habit in so many aspects of our lives, whether it's how we eat or how we exercise. For my students, they understand the link between practice and athletic performance or practice and musical skill, but we don't always then recognize that the same principles apply to our intellects, our ability to pray, or to be contemplative. Those are also practices that we can get better at or allow to dissipate. So yeah, I got a lot of my ideas in that section from Thoreau, Henry David Thoreau. And I think he was wrestling with these issues at a different technological era but one that was also a key kind of pivot moment, with the spread of the

telegraph and the railroad that was making, you know, cheap newspapers produced in big cities easily available throughout the country.

Jeff Bilbro 08:51

And so he thought about it both in terms of the food metaphor, right, what is a healthy diet of reading? He also has this great metaphor where he talks about how if we read too much trivial stuff and pay attention to bits and pieces of news, we actually macadamize our minds or we make our minds into this kind of a roadway that was relatively recent in 19th century in which the road engineers would only use small gravel rocks. There would be no large rocks, which was the norm before John McAdam developed this road construction technique. And I think it's a very apt metaphor, because when we fragment our attention, and when we kind of dissipate it over lots of different bits of data, we turn our minds into thoroughfares that are easy for memes or slogans or advertisements or political discourse to just zoom through, and there's no resistance to them. We don't question them or think about them more deliberately. So Thoreau is, I guess, talking about what people today describe in terms of neuroplasticity but without the kind of neuroscience knowledge to back him up.

Eddie Rester 10:17

Yeah, we talk about, you know, the little rocks versus the big rocks, I think of how I consume news now. I get up in the morning and open my Apple news app, and I scroll through, you know, dozens of headlines and maybe click on, read three lines, click back out and go to something else. Say a little bit more if you can about how is that damaging to us? Or what do we lose when we're consuming news in that manner?

Jeff Bilbro 10:48

Yeah, I mean, I think a lot of people have talked about, there's been a lot of... There's a little genre now of a kind of personal essay, how I can no longer read long essays, or sometimes authors that can no longer write essays or books. I think Caitlin Flanagan had one recently in the Atlantic, or Andrew Sullivan, who's kind of a crazy blogger--crazy in the content he used to produce. So maybe those are kind of exceptional people. But a lot of people have experienced that. When you consume news or information in kind of small bits and doses, it becomes more difficult to sustain your attention and read a whole book, much less write a whole book or take on some project that requires stamina. And I don't want to overplay that, I think, you know, people can change, right? And then in some ways, I suppose what's the bad news is also the good news, that if our brains are trainable, so that we train them to accept and want this kind of diet of drips of information, they're also trainable any other way. We can also train our brains to read chunks of a book or read long essays.

Eddie Rester 12:05

And the way that you talk, you really draw a line, that the way we are reading in small chunks impacts our relationships, as well. So say a little bit about that. How is that changing how we relate and love other people, which I think is a significant part of what you're trying to get at here?

Jeff Bilbro 12:27

Yeah, I think there are a lot of different connections to our relationships. I suppose one is simply our actual vocabulary, and the nuance with which we're able to think about issues decrease, so that we aren't able to grapple with the particulars of a situation. It becomes more tempting to just lump a person or an issue or an event into a kind of prepackaged ideological or political category and think about it in those terms, rather than recognize that real life and real people are complicated, and they don't fit in a neat stereotype. For as much as we decry stereotypes today, I think, because of the volume of information we deal with, we have come to rely upon them, maybe more than ever. We just need those kinds of mental crutches to filter the the information. And in some sense, that's inevitable, but it's obviously dangerous, right, when we then relate to people as as members of these large categories.

Jeff Bilbro 13:37

And so I think one danger is that we are more prone to put people in buckets and say, oh, this person is a bad person, because I know this fact about them, or this person is a good person, because I know this fact about them. And so we tend to relate to people also on the basis of these bits of information, rather than trying to develop more personal and particularized relationships with people.

Chris McAlilly 14:04

So the title of the book is "Reading the Times," but in fact, you're not suggesting that we read the times or maybe that we would adjust the way we read the times and I guess that's the inquiry bit and just this phrase of "reading the times" comes from Thoreau, and you reference this bit from his papers: "If we have thus desecrated ourselves as who has not, the remedy will be by wariness and devotion to reconsecrate ourselves and to make once more a faned of the mind as opposed to a profaned mind. We should treat our minds that is ourselves as innocent and ingenious children whose guardians we are and be careful what objects or what subjects we thrust on their attention. Read not the times Read the eternities." Talk a little bit about that quotation.

Jeff Bilbro 15:05

Yeah, Thoreau, as is his want, states things in pretty stark terms. Right? It's a matter of sacral duty to keep your mind free from.

Chris McAlilly 15:18 TikTok, in Eddie's case.

Jeff Bilbro 15:20

Exactly. Exactly. And of course, Paul makes a similar point, right when he says, he talks in several places about fix your minds on things above or, you know, whatever is true and noble and good, think about such things. So in that regard, Thoreau is is in line with Paul's advice. And of course, as you point out, yeah, he concludes there. Okay, so if our problem is that we've attended too much to ephemeral trivia, the solution is read the eternities, you know, turn away from the times and just focus on things that are durable and have lasted. And I think in general, that's right.

Jeff Bilbro 15:57

But yeah, the title of the book is kind of a modified version of that, right? Because hopefully, and this is perhaps a paradox, but hopefully, by forming our souls in the Scripture first of all, but also in other wisdom and lasting truths, we are actually able to be more perceptive interpreters of what's going on right now and then also responding wisely to what's happening. You know, so often, if we are just fixated on what's happening today, we'll respond to it very superficially, right? It's just a kind of response to a stimulus, and then maybe we'll do some kind of gesture in response, right. We'll change the background of our Facebook profile, or donate money on some GoFundMe, but we won't actually change our lives and response or do anything that's inconvenient or difficult.

Jeff Bilbro 16:57

And I think, in some ways, the quality of our engagement with what's happening around us right now is inversely proportional to the quantity of information that we take in. So it's not, I'm not saying check out, don't care what's going on. I am saying, if you actually want to respond lovingly and redemptively to what's happening, you have to be at a certain removed from it so that we're not just immersed in what's happening.

Chris McAlilly 17:27

Yeah, and there are different ways I want to talk about later that you can you can engage the eternities or eternal truth, through the created world through, you know, local communities, through the liturgical calendar, etc. But I wanted to just come back to this idea that you can hone your attention in a particular kind of way. And it might mean to pull back from certain media consumption habits, or reading the news, reading the times in a particular kind of way.

Chris McAlilly 17:54

You talk about it, I think it's just interesting to think about reading the eternities, cultivating attention, and the connection to prayer. And you bring this out in a quotation from Simone Weil, the French mystic and thinker, just the habit of attention being quite similar to prayer. I wonder if you could just tease that out for us a little bit, how you think about that. Because I do think it's true. Like what you attend to, what you give your mind to, what you give your heart to, it's very close to what religious folk think of when they think about prayer.

Jeff Bilbro 18:38

Yeah, and obviously Simone's formulation as something like, you know, attention is prayer, kind of sounds extreme, but you read somebody like Brother Lawrence, or these other authors about kind of contemplative or ongoing prayer. That's basically what they're talking about, right? What does it look like to foster a habit of mind that is a kind of prayer without ceasing? And if in all the cracks and crannies of our lives, we just turn to some kind of source of external information, right: let's see what's new on social media in this three minute stretch, or let's make sure I have a podcast on the background while I'm washing the dishes, then it makes it really difficult to foster a kind of prayerful heart. Thomas Merton, who I also quoted in this book a little later says that Christians should have quiet homes, at

least to some extent, and that there's always a kind of background noise. It's very difficult to practice and direct our attention toward God.

Eddie Rester 19:47

Henri Nouwen in his little book, "The Way of the Heart" talks a little bit about that when he's saying that one of the reasons we continue to fill our days with noise is because it's we're terrified of the silence, and that it is the silence where we get to hear God, where we get to clean out the cobwebs, when we begin to kind of figure out who we are where we want to be. But most of us are terrified of facing the silence.

Eddie Rester 20:15

I just think about, I'm gonna sound like an old man here for a second, but I think about consumption of news and the things that you took in, when I was, you know, when I was young, you got a morning newspaper, which I would devour, because I loved reading the newspaper. You got 30 minutes of local news at the end of the day, in 30 minutes of national news, if you chose to watch that. And that was media consumption in my hometown, my little world at least. And now I was reading recently, 50% of people get their news from social media. And social media is accessible at any given moment.

Eddie Rester 20:57

And I just wonder, long term, you know, as you're write at end of the book, about how that begins to shape us. I think one of the things that I'm becoming more and more aware of is that we're always being disciplined by something. And I guess that's where I'm going here. I hear some of those threads in what you're writing, is that it feels like right now we're being disciplined by all of what we're trying to quickly take in across the day. What's a healthier way? What's a healthier habit?

Eddie Rester 20:59

Yeah, that's a tough question, Eddie. I mean, I think you're right. I would say, there is, you know, Thoreau is concerned about the same issues, right.

Jeff Bilbro 21:41

So it's maybe not so much that this is a new problem as that it's a new form, or maybe a more acute form of a perennial human problem. But I think you're right, that there is a kind of discipleship that's always happening. And, you know, I suppose one thing that you could say is that we should be conscious and deliberate about what we're disciplining ourselves to, what we're allowing to form us. And, you know, I think I am encouraged by the way that that my students, many young people today, and old people, are recognizing that, wow, I've kind of fallen into this way of relating to my smartphone, or to these various sources and streams of information, and I don't like what they're doing to me, and I want something different. And so I think there's ways that are not true, even five or 10 years ago, there's a real appetite for different patterns of reading and attention that I think is a good backlash.

Eddie Rester 21:41 Right.

Chris McAlilly 22:53

Yeah, I think that's right. I think I see that in some of our college students. I mean, both. I mean, it's the full spectrum.

Jeff Bilbro 22:59 Sure, absolutely.

Chris McAlilly 23:01

I mean, there are people that handle it well and poorly, in every age demographic. You know, I mean, I noticed this habits in myself. There are days where I do it better than others. I'm sure that's the case for both you guys as well. I do love the way in which this kind of instinct to first just to take a click back, if it's not full withdrawal, it is definitely kind of repositioning social media or digital media consumption as kind of the first step or the first move of our attention in a particular day. But then to kind of cultivate other habits, habits of just walking. I loved the section of the book where you kind of engage walking as a practice. And I could go back and read it, but I wonder if you could just kind of summarize what is captivating to you about just the practice of walking as an alternative to reading the times through the news?

Jeff Bilbro 24:08

Yeah, there are so many different ways that people recommend to retrain attention, and I think a lot of them are great. But I think a really accessible one and maybe a really, I don't know, counterintuitive one is just to take a walk without your device and you know, maybe with a friend maybe by yourself and just see what you observe, because when you experience your neighborhood, your town, the woods nearby at the pace of of a stroll, you see what's happening around you in a really different way. It's local news, it's what's happening right now, but your experience in it, you know, unmediated from a screen or your car windshield and at a pace that you can take in. So I think it's it's local and it's embodied in ways that kind of cut against the grain of most of our information diet.

Jeff Bilbro 25:05

And, you know, one of the things I appreciate is I get to see my neighbors or to meet people, hear what's going on, what they're concerned about. And also, I get to learn the different the names and habits and behavior of the plants and animals around me that I don't really recognize only from my car. So something that's been really helpful for me. And the more I thought about it, the more I realized, wow, there's this whole long tradition of people talking about how powerful walking is, particularly again, when it has become a kind of less common practice, right, because we drive everywhere. Or if we do work out, many people just go to the gym and walk or bike on a treadmill.

Chris McAlilly 25:52

Part of it is slowing down, too, you know. I mean, it's taking in the day at a pace. I like what you said, just taking, walking is a pace that we can... We can take things in at the pace of walking. There's a speed to our lives that's part of the problem here. We just literally can't take it all in as fast as it's coming our direction

Jeff Bilbro 26:16

Isn't there a pastor, I think it's Matt Canlis, no, I can't remember his name, up in Wenatchee, who talks about a three mile an hour God, like Jesus went everywhere at three miles per hour, I can't remember the name of his documentary. But I think he's right, that there is something to that pace that is very... It reminds us of our embodied limits, right, and that when we try to supersede those by accessing all kinds of information quickly, we might not be able to take all that in and process it well.

Eddie Rester 26:49

In one of the things when you're walking, when you're slowing your pace down, when you're paying attention to what's local and around you, and I can't remember the quote from the book. But you're flipping the script that we're given right now. Right now, basically we take all this information in, and then we look at the people around us through the lens of all of that stuff. But when we slow the pace down to three mile an hour Jesus--I love that I'm gonna go dig that up. But then you're starting in a different place. You're going to say, what does the news really have to say to my community, to my neighborhood, to my friendships, to my marriage, instead of defining your relationships, your community, your marriage. Am I reading you correctly there? I think you make that significant flip for us.

Jeff Bilbro 27:40

Yeah, and I think that's a real danger of being too plugged into the digital media sphere, that then we relate to the people in our homes and our churches, for sure, and our neighborhoods through those categories. And so yeah, flipping the script is a good way of putting it. And I think that's exactly what's oftentimes needed. I mean, so many... You know that I don't talk about this in the book, because it's happened recently, but I think so many churches, since COVID, for instance, have split or people have left and moved around, because they don't like, you know, the political camp that their church somehow took by deciding either to do this with masks or that with masks or whatever. And it's really, it's so many of those conversations, I think were kind of colonized by the external political framing. And these congregations couldn't deal with the issues as they pertain to the particular circumstances of that place and that congregation with its, you know, particular people, because all those conversations got filtered through the national political media.

Jeff Bilbro 28:46

And that is a real danger that I think occurs so often now, where school boards meet to talk about books, or whatever. And instead of dealing with the local issues, it's just a way for the kind of national debate to play out. And so anything that we can do to redirect the structure of those conversations so that they're not predetermined by those kinds of ideological divides, I think is a good thing.

Eddie Rester 29:16

I think you're dead on there with how, you know, just COVID. We can talk about a dozen issues within the life of the church. But you know, sitting with COVID, as pastors, we felt that intensely, that whatever was going on in the national media, on either side, any side of it--I hate to say there are just two sides.

There are a thousand sides. People brought that to the life of the church, instead of what does scripture say to us about caring for each other? What does scripture say to us about the freedom to work? What does scripture and what do we say to each other about it? And then we'll go read, we'll interpret what's coming at us from MSNBC or Fox or the BBC or something like that, I think

Chris McAlilly 30:02

But isn't it also that--and we've talked about this. We've probably talked about this on the podcast--that something very real is lost when you're not with people in embodied ways? And you have those just chance interactions with people where you just kind of, you know, ask about nothing in the weather. You think of those as being inconsequential. But I think that what those do is just give you a base of relational capital, for lack of a better word, where you just give people the benefit of the doubt, you know. Like, you talk about the weather. You talk about the Ole Miss Rebels. You kind of make a little joke about X, Y, or Z thing. And that really does create a communal bond that allows you to kind of, you know, just come back into the, "Well, the he's just that guy. We know the kind of thing that that guy says, you know. He's always been saying that kind of thing. And that's just who he is. And we love him anyway."

Chris McAlilly 31:08

You know, I think that context was removed. And so the the context in which we were interacting with one another was on a feed alongside every other thing that was coming through. And so I don't know. It was disembodied. Embodied, real life community does change the way that you hear other people, especially people you disagree with.

Jeff Bilbro 31:36

That's exactly right. And of course, COVID, just, I don't know, accentuated or maybe exacerbated, that kind of tend toward virtual or disinvited community that was already at place, right? So it took that kind of incipient tendency for our conversations to migrate to the virtual, and pushed them all there overnight. And I think that was really... You know, again, hopefully, it gave more people an appetite to recover those practices of physical relationships and those kinds of conversations you're talking about that aren't consequential, but over time, create the pattern of a healthy community. So maybe, maybe there'll be a renewed hunger for that, I hope, but it's certainly a big loss, and the content of the conversation suffers when it's pushed to the virtual.

Chris McAlilly 32:32

I do. I mean, I guess where we are, or I guess where, you know, here in Oxford, it's a small town, and I do feel that some of those bonds are beginning to re... There is a reweaving of that social fabric that I think is happening. I think it's just organically happening. And I do sense that we're in a different place than we were a year ago or two years ago, at least in our local community. Eddie, you're about to jump in.

Eddie Rester 33:00

Yeah, I was gonna say one of the phrases that you used that I loved, kind of pulled it out, "swarms of atomized individuals." That when we get caught up, in kind of the, I guess, the too much coming in, and enough embodiment, we don't relate to each other in the same way. I see that a lot. And I, you know, one of the things I've been tracking recently is particularly men's ability to relate to each other. It's been, you know, falling for decades, the number of friends men claim to have, but sending people home to work from home has exacerbated what was already a problem for a lot of men in our society, which was the only friends they make are the friends that they make at work. And I wonder if a lot of the anger that we're getting now is because we've become those swarms of atomized individuals.

Eddie Rester 34:09

As you think about taking the walk, three mile an hour Jesus, are there other things we can do in your mind to not just disconnect, but begin to re-engage with people at a significant level, maybe things that your students talk about?

Jeff Bilbro 34:28

I think to what Chris was talking about in terms of kind of reweaving the social fabric after the disruptions of COVID, I think that those are really helpful. You know, the craze in my neighborhood right now is pickleball, which I haven't played. But everyone in my church, everyone, my neighborhood, everyone in town seems to be playing pickleball together And I think that's great, you know, they're outside. They're getting exercise. They're becoming, you know, becoming friends and acquaintances. So I'm encouraged by that trend. And I guess that's apparently a national trend, like it's a very popular sport now.

Chris McAlilly 35:06

People are doing that here too.

Eddie Rester 35:07

A lot of old people play it.

Chris McAlilly 35:10

Yeah, it's like ping pong for old people. No, that's not right.

Jeff Bilbro 35:14

I don't know, here it's also young people. So it's all ages.

Chris McAlilly 35:19

[LAUGHTER] I got that totally wrong. Cody's over here, Cody's our producer, he's like, "I wouldn't have said that on the podcast. I wouldn't have done that." I apologize.

Eddie Rester 35:30

It's actually great. It's tennis, on a small scale, so that it's an easier game.

Jeff Bilbro 35:37

Right. You don't have to run as much. Yeah.

Chris McAlilly 35:39

My wife is not going to like that I said that.

Jeff Bilbro 35:41

I do think that's an example of how people are hungry for these kinds of interactions, you know. Or even if you have to work from home, a lot of times people want to go to those work at a coffee shop or work at a shared office space, so they can have those kinds of social interactions. So I guess, I think it is a real problem and I think you're right that the work from home push can make it worse, actually, especially for men whom it was already bad before in terms of the number of close friendships they have. But I also think that in some ways that creates this hunger that then hopefully, there are spaces in our churches and in our communities, where they can go get a healthier kind of community.

Jeff Bilbro 36:28

So you know, I think, this summer for the first time, in our town, in the last two years, the church softball league was reconvened. And that was great. It's a great way to meet people from other churches in the area, and interact with people who go to my church in a much different way that we interact on a Sunday morning. So yeah, I think there are opportunities there if we can be a little bit proactive and seek them out and hopefully tend those kinds of institutions and organizations, so that they're available for other people as well.

Chris McAlilly 37:00

Yeah, I do think that the pickleball, softball, you know, these are games. I mean, it's play. I think sometimes we take for granted that the ways in which adults need to commune with one another is around serious matters. We form committees, we do all these serious things, but there's something child like and wonderful about just playing. And in play, I do think is, beyond learning a craft, going for a walk, I think play has a community enhancing capacity.

Chris McAlilly 37:35

There's a long section of the book that's a bit more theoretical about time, about Chronos and Kairos time, and developing kind of the ability to read the times through the story or the lens of the death and resurrection of Christ. I don't want to go into all of that. But I did want to ask you about, you kind of come down hard on viewing time as progressive, kind of this modern idea that we're progressing in the direction of the right or wrong side of history. And you're clear to say that this is not just a liberal or a... It's not just a liberal issue. There are conservative and progressive framings where people are trying to put themselves on the right or wrong side of history. Why do you see that framing is as problematic? I wonder if you could unpack that a bit.

Jeff Bilbro 38:32

Yeah, I guess that's gonna be kind of a grouchy part of the book. But I do think it's a problem that we tend to so easily fall into this mode of privileging things based on whether they're on the right side of history, or you know, somebody so medieval. Or I see on social media sometimes, like, can you believe that this is the case of the 21st century? As if there's just kind of baseline assumption that our technology is getting better, our morality is getting better or progressing. And I think it's also very American, you know, for particular historical reasons, it's a very American assumption.

Jeff Bilbro 39:09

And there I quote Hegel, who's probably the forefather of a lot of this thinking, and he says that, for the realist, you know, for the person who's a good modern realist, the act of reading your newspaper should replace that of morning prayer. That we no longer need to orient ourselves to the day based on reading the Bible and praying and pay attention to what's going on in God's life and work. Rather, we just need to see what's new. And so much of the obsession with new and innovative stuff, and new technologies and progress stems from Hegel's view of history as kind of a development. So he makes this analogy between the way that a human person or any biological organism goes through various stages on its way to maturity. And the way that human civilization and human culture has gone through these various stages on its way to maturity, which, hey, it looks a lot like 19th century Germany, as it so happens.

Jeff Bilbro 40:14

So we tend to put ourselves, you know, we are the developed people We have progressed, and everybody else is on their way to being more like us, and we're on the way to being a better version of ourselves or whatever. And that assumption, I think, makes us or leads us to put too much emphasis on what happens in the news. And it's one of the reasons why we over commit ourselves to staying up to date with what's happening. So if we can break free from that assumption and recognize humans today are pretty much like humans were for a long time, and new stuff happens. But there's nothing new under the sun ultimately.

Jeff Bilbro 40:59

Then it kind of frees us from treating what's going on in the news as a kind of existential battle that the arc of history hinges upon and recognize that, that the arc of history is found in Christ's life and work and, you know, the narrative that the Bible gives us, it can be a really freeing experience, because it lowers the stakes of what's happening in the news.

Chris McAlilly 41:25

Yeah, I love you quote, Paul Griffiths who says, "The crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus lie at the heart of time. Time is contracted by these events, pleated, and folded around them, gathered by them in an intensely dense possibility." And I love that, because it's just a totally different way of thinking about time. If you are, if you're persuaded by or that you've you've kind of, you know, received this way of thinking of time is, things are getting every day in every way, things are getting better and better. Because things don't always get better. Things, you know, your particular family history, or depending on you know, gender or race or the part of the world you happen to be born into, you may not look at historical time and see much hope. But it is possible in light of the story of the life and death

and resurrection of Christ to begin to see patterns that are not only meaningful, but densely full of hope. And I think a lot of what I see you doing is trying to train our attention in that direction.

Chris McAlilly 42:38

So then you kind of move into a section where you think about art as a way in which we can learn those habits of attention that are shaped by a Christian imagination. When did you realize that art was one of those those traits, one of the things that could train attention in the

Jeff Bilbro 43:03

I mean, as a literature professor, I've long been interested in the ways that authors create and use narrative time, right? Because narrative time can follow chronological time pretty closely but often does not. And I think a lot of the ways that literary authors, particularly Christian literary authors, play with time can help us recognize that they get this kind of kairotic or patterned dimension to time as well. So I guess it first came through reading various Christian authors.

Jeff Bilbro 43:42

But then, yeah, I think you can see this, I didn't talk about music that much. But there's some really interesting things, obviously, because music is, you know, it unfolds sequentially. There's all kinds of things that someone like Bach will do with the structure of his music that is fascinating, and deeply Christian. And then I do talk some about visual artists, because I think it's just easier. I have the vocabulary to talk about that a little bit better. So yeah, I think you see oftentimes someone who's really had their imagination shaped by the Christian narrative is them looking to represent time as not uni-dimensional, but as kairotic, as a sort of pattern, a dramatic pattern of God's action.

Eddie Rester 44:28

And I would even... You know, I'm thinking back to a day I spent at the Detroit Institute of Art. And I went there, I was going to run through the museum in about two hours is what I had scheduled, because I was going to do it very chronologically, gonna I march through there. And yet art has this ability to draw you into something on itself, and I ended up staying there for almost five hours. I realized I needed a different pacing in life, and maybe that's part of what you're getting at as well, is that we've got to have a different pacing. Because the world's pacing right now in terms of, here's the information you think you've got to keep with. You've got to keep up with Johnny Depp and Amber Heard. You've got to know all about the Info Wars trial. You gotta. You gotta. And maybe we don't. Maybe we don't have to worry about how all the political maneuverings are gonna work out, because the bigger picture is the life, the death, the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Chris McAlilly 45:37

I think that sense that you're speaking of, Eddie, I think that folks listening probably have had these experiences where you're in time in this suspended way. And sometimes it's art. Other times it's conversation. I think of afternoons I spent at my grandfather's house where he would tell stories. And I

feel, you know, I would lose track of time, as we say. And, you know, in the series on reading and contemplation, and we had this conversation with Marilyn McIntyre, and I don't know if either it's coming or you've just heard it, depending on how we lay this thing out. But she talks about how her grandmother from Virginia used to go visitin', you know.

Eddie Rester 46:23 Visiting.

Chris McAlilly 46:24

And sometimes when your visitin', you know, on the front porch or whatever, you can just... I don't know there's something suspended there and all of a sudden you're not living in chronos. You've kind of... Something has happened and you're kind of displaced from the run of things in a way that I think can... I don't know. It can reshape the way that you attend to the world in a way that's very powerful.

Jeff Bilbro 46:51

And, you know, we talked about sports earlier, I think, David Bentley Hart has this great essay, maybe 10 years ago about baseball and how baseball it was really the only sport that doesn't operate with a clock, at least in American sports. So all the other sports, they're 90 minutes or 60 minutes, or whatever, and there's a clock, and the game just ends arbitrarily when the clock runs out. But baseball follows this dramatic pattern, right? And there's no set time for a baseball game. So even playing baseball can be that kind of experience.

Chris McAlilly 47:26

It is the holiest game right, Cody?

Jeff Bilbro 47:28 Amen.

Chris McAlilly 47:28

Cody, our producer, is a big baseball fan.

Eddie Rester 47:31

And Cody's very excited that the hometown team for him, the University of Mississippi, Ole Miss Rebels won the national championship this year. Cody...

Chris McAlilly 47:41 Huge fan.

Eddie Rester 47:41

This is why we don't give him a mic right now. Huge fan of the Rebels. Huge fan of the Rebels.

Cody Hickman 47:46

The mic has been given over to me. State did it first. All right.

Chris McAlilly 47:52 Some local baseball.

Eddie Rester 47:54

I'll tell you, I love football games, but I love baseball more, just in the moment because you show up in the middle of the first inning. It's going to last a while. So you're talking to friends. You're eating. You're laughing. Oh, there's a hit. Oh, we just got through yet. We should stand now. It's exciting. There's a different pacing there.

Chris McAlilly 48:17

Yeah, that's so fascinating that where you end the book is really like how do you develop these different liturgies and habits of really community building? You know, of Christian belonging, liturgies of Christian belonging is what you talk about. And you talk about two things. One is faithful joining. I think that was what you said, I can't recall. You probably remember. I don't have it right here in front of me. But this idea that you can, you could join a community. You could actually intentionally choose to be a part of the community that orders time and thinks about life in a different fashion.

Jeff Bilbro 48:57

Yeah, I think that's right. And we sometimes undersell the power that we have to make those kinds of choices and to be deliberate and to reach out to people who we otherwise wouldn't have a lot in common with. But especially to the power of the Gospel, there's a lot of commonality. That's a deep bond that should join us. And so if those are our primary relationships, then we'll become a whole different kind of person, rather than if our political identity or these other maybe less significant identities drive how we see ourselves and how we experience the world.

Eddie Rester 49:41

Jeff, I want to thank you for your time today. For those listening, the book is "Reading the Times" by Jeffrey Bilbo. It's been a just a joy to get to talk to you and to think about how do we read the world in a different way. So thank you for what you wrote. Thank you for your work.

Jeff Bilbro 49:59

We thank you very much. I think this is an important topic that you guys are addressing. So I'm glad to be part of it a little bit.

Eddie Rester 50:07

[OUTRO] Thanks for listening. If you've enjoyed the podcast, the best way to help us is to like, subscribe, or leave a review.

Chris McAlilly 50:13

If you would like to support this work financially or if you have an idea for a future guest, you can go to theweightpodcast.com. [END OUTRO]