

“Finding Y(our) Joy”
Isaiah 58:9-14
Andrew Foster Connors
August 25, 2019
11th Sunday after Pentecost

It’s so good to be back from sabbatical, this period of rest and renewal that pairs perfectly with the lectionary texts today that are all about the Sabbath. Israel was mandated to observe the Sabbath – to press pause each week on business as usual so that all people could rest. Isaiah says that Sabbath is all about the other. Not doing as you please on a day that belongs to God, not going your own way, not speaking idle words, but giving that time to God so that the entire community is made whole. Jesus reinforces this in the Gospel passage by healing on the Sabbath. Sabbath isn’t about regulations or decorum or rules. It is about preserving the other.

Which makes my sabbatical seem really selfish. Pursuing my own interests is exactly what I’ve been doing the last three and a half months. Even the study of team building feels a bit selfish for the church. Who cares whether we build good teams at the church? Isn’t that church navel gazing? How is that kind of internal work resisting the powers of death precisely at time in our nation’s history when the other is in the cross-hairs? The immigrant, the non-white American, the person whose political views you resent, women who refuse to defer to patriarchy.

And yet being away for awhile, going up on the balcony of life and work and viewing our culture from outside the places where we are always trying to change it, outside of the daily grind, outside of the relentless news cycle, has given me some perspective on why it’s not accurate to describe Sabbath-keeping as *only* about the other. Honoring the Sabbath is about *us together* in the presence of God. In fact, it’s the “us and them” binary that Sabbath keeping seems to explode altogether. My wellbeing is connected to your wellbeing. Your wellbeing to mine. The ideal Sabbath calls us all to press pause together.

One of the books I reread on sabbatical was Edwin Friedman’s *Failure of Nerve*, a book on leadership.¹ Friedman argues that while a great deal of attention has been paid to economic and political forces in American culture, not enough attention has been paid to the emotional process. The emotional process of our time, he wrote, a full twenty years before our time, is one of rampant anxiety.² I saw this while on

¹ Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, (New York: Church Publishing), 1999, 2007, 2017.

² Friedman died in October of 1996 before this book was completed. According to the editors, the earlier chapters including the one where he assesses the anxiety of our time, was complete prior to his death. Later chapters were completed by colleagues from his notes.

sabbatical. The way I culture reacts almost reflexively to the latest offensive tweet, the latest scandal, the latest cultural event. The way preaching colleagues fret over whether or not they should throw out the sermon for the week at the latest attack on immigrants, or the most recent mass shooting, or the most recent trashing of a city, a person, nation, or group of people. The way even the most centered families in our community find themselves swept up in the anxiety machines that are chewing up and spitting out our children, turning childhood as one columnist wrote recently into “one long unpaid internship meant to secure a spot in a dwindling middle class.”³

What is needed, Friedman argues, is not more reactivity, but a kind of centeredness that he calls “differentiation.” The ability to contain one’s reactivity to the reactivity of others. The ability to take maximum responsibility for one’s own emotional being and destiny rather than blaming others or the context.⁴ When we do this, Friedman argues, we make true community possible.

Toward the beginning of the sabbatical I spent two weeks at a timber frame building course in Berkshires. I’d say half the class was comprised of contractors and building professionals. The other half, skilled carpenters. CJ hailed from rural Alabama, with a ZZ top beard, and an accent that was literally unintelligible to another carpenter from Montreal. The Northeasterns were uncomfortable around CJ especially after I asked him what his wife was doing during the day while he was at the workshop and he told us she was at their AirBnB doing her Bible studies and sewing. Sometimes I think culture has become the new leprosy of our time. We’re afraid we’re going to catch something from each other just by being in each other’s presence.

Early in the week I found myself at lunch with CJ. Being the rascal that I am, I steered the conversation toward politics, confident that he would confirm all the negative stereotypes about him that I had already beautifully constructed in the workshop of my mind. But CJ lived in a much larger house than the box I tried to put him in. “When we looked at the house we bought,” he told me, “we were talking to this neighbor, this white lady who says she likes the neighborhood, and then gets real quiet,” CJ says and she whispers, “‘except for those Mexicans who live next door.’ So I lean in real close and I say to her, “‘You know, I actually like Mexicans. I’ve had very positive experiences with all kinds of immigrants to this country. Have you ever had a negative experience with an immigrant? I want to hear about it.’ And she gets real uncomfortable,” he says, “and stammers and stutters.”

CJ took a bite of his apple. “I ask all of my friends and family members the same question,” he told me. “Have you ever have a negative experience with an

³ Kim Brooks, “We Have Ruined Childhood,” *The New York Times*, August 17, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/17/opinion/sunday/childhood-suicide-depression-anxiety.html?searchResultPosition=2> .

⁴ Friedman, 195.

immigrant? And you know,” he told me, “I have yet to meet one person in rural Alabama who’s had a negative experience. They all know me. I confront them all.”

But truthfully, the person CJ confronted that day was me, pushed into my corner by all those tweets, all those stereotypes that we allow us to shape us more than we think. The best thing I did for immigrants that day, was to press pause on my own life, and reexamine my own biases so that CJ had another friend, not another person in his life making assumptions about people before he had even met them. The best thing I did for the other, was to face the bias in myself.

The whole point of the Sabbath, Isaiah argues, is to press pause on life – and not just every seven years – but every week to put God’s vision back in the center of our lives. And that vision is not justice only for the other, or goodness only for the other – it is justice and goodness for all of us together. If you do this, God says, then you will find joy in the Lord. You and me and we together. Where do you need to press pause in your own life? Where do you need to face your own biases, your own prejudices, your own barriers to engaging others with your full self? What would it take for you to be able to bring your full self into your relationships, your work, your school, this community?