

About a decade ago, I took a position where I was going to have to start commuting about an hour and a half, or an hour and fifteen minutes, each way to work. It was an hour and fifteen minutes if the traffic was cooperating, and traffic driving into Albany never seemed to go the way I wanted it to. So I spent a lot of one summer sitting in a car, driving to and from work.

I decided I would spend my time doing something productive, so I started listening to audiobooks as I drove. I would download them from the library and play them through my phone, and I would play them back at 1.5 times speed, because I wanted to get through them quickly enough, and those narrators talk really slow. So I'd be driving along, same route every day: about half an hour on the back roads before I got to I-87, and then about forty-five minutes on the interstate, back and forth five or six times a week. And it ended up being a pretty boring drive.

When I start to get bored, I start to get distracted. My mind starts to wander. Not a good thing when you're driving, and not necessarily a good thing when you're trying to pay attention to a book and drive. Well, my mind would wander. It would wander into the past. I would replay things that had happened the day before, things I should have done differently. It would wander into the future. I would start thinking about all the things I had to do for the rest of the week. And sometimes it would just wander wherever it wanted to go. As my thoughts wandered, I began to lose track of what I was listening to, and more often than not I was rewinding a couple of chapters to figure out what was going on in the story I was supposed to be paying attention to, while I was also supposed to be paying attention to driving.

Because I have always struggled at concentrating on things. I've always struggled with paying attention or staying present. A couple of times a year I go to workshops on spiritual disciplines now, and one of the disciplines they always start us off with is going off to a quiet space for half an hour or forty-five minutes to just sit in quiet and be with your own thoughts for a moment. And I can't do it. I cannot sit there quietly for ten minutes, much less half an hour. I'm not good with silence. I'm awful at sitting still. And for the life of me, I can't figure out a way to get my brain to stop racing at times. Being present in a moment is probably one of the hardest things you can ask me to do. That, and simple arithmetic.

So I want to begin today by saying that what I am going to be speaking about is something I have a hard time doing. But that's okay. It's okay, because in the church we talk about things that put us outside our comfort zone. That's what we're all about here at First United Methodist Church: pushing the boundaries of what makes us comfortable so that we can be more Christ-like.

Isaiah and the Sabbath

I was reading our passage from Isaiah, and I was thinking about how there's a movement in the prophet's words that leads us right into the practice of keeping Sabbath. If you were here and you remember two weeks ago, we started with Isaiah 58 and those instructions from God, passed through the prophet, to loose the bonds of injustice, to feed the hungry, to bring the homeless indoors. The prophet tells us that in those ways we worship God. But as Isaiah 58 goes on, we come to the passage that Charles shared with us a few minutes ago, where Isaiah ties God's favor not just to helping those who struggle in life but also to keeping the Sabbath day.

I would not blame you if you're sitting there right now wondering how those things go together. How does our feeding and clothing and sheltering ministry relate to keeping a day of rest that God has commanded?

I think here is the connection: the Sabbath is all about learning to be present in a moment of time.

Abraham Heschel wrote extensively on the Sabbath, and one of the things he writes about is how the Sabbath shifted a way of thinking. For thousands and thousands of years, people thought of spaces as being holy. You would have temples that were built, you would have sacred mountains, you would have physical spaces in the world that were thought of as holy. But as the idea of a Sabbath develops, Heschel invites us to think of holiness transferring from places to time. From spaces that we occupy to moments that we live in. It was the Sabbath that was to be holy, not the churches, not the temples, not the mountains. It was time that was holy. Moments that were sacred.

Allow me to paraphrase a quote of his. I think it speaks to what I mean when I talk about the art of being present in a moment. Heschel writes that Sabbath is more than just an interlude in our lives. It is a profound, conscious harmony of the human and the world: a sympathy for all things, and a participation in the spirit that unites what is below and what is above. All that is divine in the world is brought into unison with God.

So I think what Heschel is trying to say is that being present in the world is more than just paying attention to your surroundings or the book you're listening to. Being present, or practicing Sabbath, is about becoming aware of your connectedness with others and your connectedness to God.

And maybe that can clue us in on why Isaiah makes the leap from caring for the downtrodden to Sabbath keeping. We learn to be present with those who hunger, those who thirst, those who have been left out or left behind, through our practice of being present with others, through our practice of Sabbath, through our own developing of that

mutual participation in the spirit that unites us all with God. When we practice the Sabbath, when we practice keeping present with one another, we learn from one another. We become involved in one another's lives, and we discover the value in one another no matter the life circumstances we may find ourselves in.

Jesus and the Least of These

I think Jesus talks about being present as well. For the last few weeks we've been talking about the passage from Matthew 25, where Jesus says that when you have done it for the least of these, you have done it unto me. And when you haven't cared for the least of these, you haven't cared for me. We began this series two weeks ago with Jesus separating people into two groups: those who have cared for the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless, the sick, the imprisoned, and those who haven't.

Two weeks ago I talked about how surprising it must have been to learn that the separation Christ will do when Christ comes into Christ's glory does not seem to be contingent on how we worship, or even on our own personal righteousness. The separation seems to be contingent on our ability to care, to love, to serve. Maybe we could say the separation is contingent on our ability to see Christ in the eyes of the downtrodden, the hurting, the lost; to see Christ in the face of another.

Throughout this series, I have kept coming back personally to how powerfully challenging that is for our faith and our church. Because I think what Jesus is telling us is that we can show up to church every Sunday. We can run through all the motions and the rituals of our faith. We can be the first on our knees in prayer. We can be the loudest to sing the hymns. We can be the most fervent in sharing the gospel. And none of it will have mattered if we have failed to act with love toward the hurting, with care toward the needy, with compassion for the lonely. If we have failed at those things, we have failed faith entirely.

You see, I think Jesus is inviting us into a kind of faith that needs to be present with others.

Now, I'm going to be the first to tell you that this is not going to look the same for all of us. For you, it's probably going to look different than it does for me. For an introvert, it's going to look different than for an extrovert. Some may show care by writing cards to shut-ins every week. Some may show care by showing up at somebody's house with a casserole after they've gotten out of the hospital. Some may show their love and care in ways that others of us could not even imagine doing. Living our faith doesn't look the same for everyone, because there's no one way to be present. Just as no two of us are alike, no two of us will be present in the world alike. But that does not get us out of our responsibility: the responsibility to extend love, care, and compassion by entering into the lives of those around us. Because when we do, we may very well see the face of Christ.

Ecclesia

I said it was a surprise when Jesus said this. But I wonder if it might also be something of a relief. Because the further I understand Christ, the further I understand what the mission of the church is, the more I start thinking that maybe we got it wrong. That maybe coming to know Christ has nothing to do with studying a particular book, or reciting the right prayers, or going to the right church that doesn't preach heresy. Coming to know Christ, I think, is a lot easier than all of that. Challenging, to be sure, but easier still.

I've come to discover that coming to know Christ happens when we are present with one another. The apostles have a word for it. They called it the *ecclesia*. In Greek, that just means a gathering of people, but it was the first word the apostles used for the churches they were building. There wasn't a church building. There wasn't a set of beliefs that everybody had to follow. There was a gathering of community: a living, breathing experience of people being present with one another. That was their church. That was what they strove for.

What a change we've made. We take membership vows now. We support physical structures over that community sometimes. How different the church has become, where we get so obsessed with studying the right things or saying the right words, when maybe all we needed all along was a community that stayed present with one another. Present with one another when life went well, but, more often, as Jesus reminds us, present in the hard moments of life.

A Goal for Today

So I wonder, as we bring an end to this worship series, and as we begin to think about what we're going to do for the rest of our Sunday, if maybe we can set a goal for when we leave church today. A goal of being more present with at least one other person.

Maybe it's somebody you know who's been struggling. How can you be present for them today? Maybe it's someone you know who's been hurting. How can you be present for them today? Maybe it's just somebody you know who hasn't gone out of the house lately, who has become more and more isolated recently. What can you do to be present for that person?

Or maybe, if you want to push yourself outside of your comfort zone a little bit more: how can you be present for someone you don't know? How can you leave church today and maybe see somebody across the street, someone you don't know, who's having a hard time? How can you show up for them? How can you be the *ecclesia*, the church, for them? How can you practice the art of being present for them? And how, in doing so, might you be gazing upon the likeness of Christ?

Beloveds, let us be in prayer for a moment.

Prayer

Holy God, sometimes we've gotten so busy. We have filled our days with things that need to get done, and sometimes in our busyness we walk past the opportunities to be present for one another. Remind us of your Sabbath, that you gave us six days for busyness and a day to rest from that busyness. A day when we can practice the art of showing up, being present, channeling the love of Christ to those who surround us. Holy One, instill the Sabbath deep within our bones, that we may know that in resting with you we grow in Christ. In Christ I pray. Amen.