

Summary and Reflection: Session 4: September 8

Remarks prepared by: The Rev. Lee-Ellen Strawn

I am grateful for the invitation to be here with you at TCC because it is a powerful reminder that Church, in its deepest sense, is so much more than a building or even a congregation. In Christ, I am as committed to you and your desire to know God's actions in your lives as I am committed to the community at Northfield Mount Hermon where I am chaplain. So, I am grateful for this time to be together in discernment and to knowing how the Holy Spirit is moving you to see where new things are possible and to find real joy in being disciples together in the world. Discernment can be exciting but it can also be a difficult process. And so I am inspired by the courage, honesty and vulnerability that you have shown this morning. To me this also means there is a level of trust in your community.

This morning I heard you share your fears of what a declining membership will mean and whether this will lead to an empty sanctuary. I heard sadness expressed, and the question was raised as to 'why the Holy Spirit is not moving in Northfield.' You also spoke of fatigue. But you also expressed a deep hunger and desire to follow God's will and to understand your church's mission and purpose in a changing 21st century world. Some of you shared what the church has meant to you throughout your lives, and the question was posed about how to use this knowledge to reimagine the church's role for the future.

Towards the end of the discussion, the idea of a church sabbath was brought up. To think about a church sabbath is authentic and faithful. God, indeed, calls us to sabbath at certain points in our lives. Sabbath happens in the presence of God who heals and restores us and empowers us to go back into the world and participate in God's work. You are being faithful, then, in considering a church sabbath and what that will look like. You are being faithful in seeking this sabbath in the presence of God who will heal, restore and empower you in, maybe, new and unexpected ways to be church here in Northfield, Massachusetts in the 21st century.

I believe the gifts of sabbath are really two-fold; for one, sabbath gives the time and space for figuring out ourselves. Who are we, what makes us tick, and how are we unique, what is our passion as a community? Really, this self-understanding is a process of locating our heart and rejoicing in the treasure we find there, if I were to connect back to the Matthew passage we heard earlier. So, sabbath is a time of self-reflection. Secondly, sabbath gives time and space to know God more or to understand better how God is revealing God's self to us. So, sabbath is really about searching for our heart and also being open to God's revelations.

Let me just end by saying that the God we worship, the God whose love created us individually and as a community, the God we know through the lives of Abraham & Sarah, Isaac & Rebecca, Joseph & Mary and countless more, is a God in motion. This God calls us to move with God to familiar places, but also to new places that become our promised lands precisely because God goes with us. God moves with us. The God we know is a God in motion.

My hope for you is that in your sabbath, (should you decide to take a sabbath), you will allow time for prayer and study to know this God in motion and to see where God is going in the 21st century. Make space to receive revelation, and allow that revelation to point to your heart that you may rejoice in the treasure you find there.

I leave you with my favorite scripture passage that I remember memorizing in Sunday school many years ago. Maybe, it can be a template for your sabbath, and in your faithfulness I believe the Holy Spirit will move mightily.

First Thessalonians 5:16-18

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Rejoice, yes! Discernment is exciting.

Pray, yes! Pray that you will be ready and open for revelation.

Give thanks, indeed! God is in motion and in motion in you.

Rejoice. Pray. Give thanks. Rejoice. Pray. Give thanks. Amen.

Reflection by Quentin

You have my deepest appreciation and gratitude for your participation in this session. Your participation was heartfelt and had great integrity. You stayed focused and energized for a long time. Finally, this was the largest session by far we have had.

Your participation conveyed to me your deep love for this church and for each other.

We framed the discernment with a worship service and had the Rev. Lee-Ellen Strawn to listen for the movement of the Holy Spirit. Listening for the Spirit freed me to facilitate. She stopped the proceedings a few times for prayer or silence.

The reflections/comments I heard could be summarized as follows (in no particular order):

- We cannot continue as we are and expect to continue indefinitely.
- We need to stay focused on what matters to us as a community and our identity.
- Change is unsettling. We approach it with trepidation and some fear
- Let's be honest and recognize that we need to take Sabbath in order to hear how we are to be the church
- We have to respond to a changing world. Northfield has changed.
- We don't have the energy we once had and whatever we choose to do, do we have the energy to see it through?

While we did not make any decisions, the session gave space for people to give voice to what was on their hearts. A desire for bold change was not expressed, yet the inevitability of change was present.