

Text for March 7th FiBM: Sabbath as Renewal of Relationships (6 minutes)

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Outline

- What Jesus told us about how the market (money/wealth) would shape our thinking and behavior
- Consequences for human health, relationships, civil society, earth, our ability to practice Sabbath (example NYT Ethicist discussion)
- Sabbath practice requires challenging assumptions about how the mind works
- Contemplative prayer as a necessary reset tool to put our relationships in front of our market-driven desires

Opening/Context:

The one relationship, above all others, that Jesus warns us will be more important than our relationship with God (Luke 16:13 and Matthew 6:24) is mammon – wealth or money. Why did Jesus choose something physical, material, ephemeral, transitory, and not like land or power, or even sex, as the greatest human vice?

We find in Scripture that Jesus knew the power markets would have, where we can own, possess, collect, accumulate in exchange, and he warned it would become the idol that disciplines and draws out our heart more than anything else. And indeed, he was angry about it!

But money/wealth has defined and shaped our relationships, to ourselves and to others, and we designed our economic and social lives around it. It has become the most important signal of human belonging. Enter the digital age, and while the “haves” own 52% of all income while the poorest half get just 8.5 %, busting once and for all the myth of American meritocracy where you can escape poverty if you just work hard enough, we find refuge in the attention-getting technologies that “direct us away from one another and toward a manufactured reality”.¹

We are living in a time when the domination of people through distraction has made more distant the tender virtues of care, connection, and kindness taught by Jesus. As an American, it’s hard to admit that the word “civil society” feels more aspirational now than descriptive, but we see a very uncivil authoritarian quasi-religious political movement underway, and I’ll speak just to the U.S., but it is a global trend, that is appealing to those in a broken relationship with an economic system that they don’t see benefitting them the way it was supposed to. And at the same time, we have allowed our attention to

¹ Matthew Crawford (2015) “The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction” New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 10

be monetized, as Matthew Crawford writes in *The World Beyond Your Head*, and “if you want yours back, you’re going to have to pay for it”².

This personalized-but-never-personal online environment is leading to really damaging behaviors for youth, especially girls. Motivated by the fear of not being seen, the need to have constant attention leads to anxiety, depression, and violence, to the self, and, as we have seen with the hundreds of mass shootings, of others. Fears of not being enough or having enough are easily deepened by any type of economic or social insecurity. We see this especially among working class middle age white men in the U.S., who are more susceptible to being recruited by extremists, and most likely to commit suicide than any other population group in the country³.

The U.S. Surgeon General’s recently published report reveals the devastating news that never in history have Americans been more lonely, isolated, or depressed⁴, increasing the risk for individuals to develop mental health challenges, and lacking connection can increase the risk for premature death, fundamentally affecting our mental, physical, and societal health.”⁵

If we want to use the Sabbath to heal ourselves and reset our relationships, the hardest work will be to put our relationships in front of our market-driven desires and distractions. Even our language is shaped by the market: product, “spending” time, efficiency, cost, tradeoff, competition, currency. We have been trained to treat relationships as something that serves us, something transactional, extractive, which leads us to needing to account for it, instead of finding rest in it.

Jesus knew this transactional way of being would be our greatest temptation and tension, but he may not have known how technology would amplify it. Rev. John Thatamanil explains, “We say to ourselves, if I need to think more clearly, then I need to feel less”, but it is precisely this binary thinking about how the body and brain works that has misguided human societies for centuries, given a false sense of security in deferring to markets, and justified corporal acts of violence. Daniel Kahneman (and many more before him) empirically show the brain doesn’t work like this: there is simply no part of the brain, or

² Crawford, p. 12

⁵ Graham, Carol, *The Power of Hope: How the Science of Well-Being Can Save Us from Despair*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023)

⁴ “New Surgeon General Advisory Raises Alarm about the Devastating Impact of the Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation in the United States”, www.hhs.gov; accessed May 2023: <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2023/05/03/new-surgeon-general-advisory-raises-alarm-about-devastating-impact-epidemic-loneliness-isolation-united-states.html>

what we refer to as the “mind”, that is doing the thinking, while another doing the feeling. In fact, the brain’s ability to feel is our primary way of “knowing”! Watch a mother or a father with a baby.

Sabbath can be observed in many ways, and when we step into contemplative prayer, it becomes dedicated time away from the everyday distractions to feel the presence of God, and to allow God to hold us with the tenderness of a little baby. When we sit in silence with the hard questions about what matters most to us, and bring to God the sufferings of the world, we tend to our loves, and inevitably recognize the need to rest with ourselves, exactly as we are, and seek the peace that God brings for our restoration. When we practice Sabbath this way, we cultivate our ability to serve as a place of rest for others, which is what the world desperately needs. We listen without needing to control the outcome. We let time and space be defined, first, by how best to love someone and tend to their needs, how to respond without needing to “fix” them, accepting them as they are. We develop the discipline, anchored in love, of bringing renewed awareness, kindness, and compassion to ourselves and to our relationships. Father Richard Rohr describes contemplative prayer as a kind of seeing that is much more than mere looking because it also includes recognizing and thus appreciating. The contemplative mind does not tell us what to see but teaches us how to see *what we behold*. We are moved, from contemplation, to ask more questions, like the one by civil rights activist Ruby Sales, “tell me, friend, where does it hurt?”

While the many different social, economic, and ecological crises deserve equal attention, as Christians, I believe our biggest crisis is believing the false narrative that we can be isolated from and build resilience to life’s challenges by resorting to the consumption, domination, extraction, and distraction that undermines our relationships to the other. When we focus our attention on the practice of Sabbath, of “ceasing” our striving to belong, and engaging in contemplative prayer, we are ready to honestly examine our hearts, to see where we need to trust God’s divine presence in our lives. Contemplation requires acceptance of the integrated self, and if we are willing to pay the price of forgoing the regard associated with a market-driven identity, then we will find the rest and freedom in our identity with Jesus.