

“Structure, Surprise and Sabbath” by Alfonso (Sito) Sasieto



June 2, 2024

Second Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 2:23-3:6

Psalm 139

1 Samuel 3:1-10

Introduction

Good morning!

It is really exciting to be here; it's my first time & my family's first time; I've been going to 8th Day for the last 10 years or so, and so it feels nice to be among extended family. However, today, I join you all not only as a representative of the Church of the Saviour, but also as a representative of L'Arche, alongside Nicorria, Crisely, and Fritz.

Originally, Jeanne and I weren't sure about the date when we would come, and we actually set the date June 2 before we knew about Emmy Lu's death. Given the last two days celebrating Emmy Lu, it seems especially sacred to be able to share how today's gospel intersects with our communal life in L'Arche...and to say thank you for your friendship as a community over these many years.

Our L'Arche community was founded in 1983. Our first L'Arche home on Ontario Road in Adams Morgan was sold to us for one cent from the Church of the Savior. It was then that our community took shape & people with and without disabilities began to share their lives together in a community.

In that spirit, Fritz, I know that you already did this on Friday, but would you like to come up and lead us in a prayer?

Fritz Prays

Gospel Recap

Today, to begin, I want to recap the stories that we encounter in today's gospel. First, we hear that Jesus & his disciples are doing something rather innocuous— picking grain, gleaning grain from the edge of the field for food. In Jesus' eyes, this is hardly in conflict with God's commandment to practice sabbath, to rest in God. However, the Pharisees come to him and say to Jesus that they are in violation of the sabbath.

Instead of turning away from the conflict, Jesus ups the ante, & references an old story to challenge their critique. The story is located in the book of 1 Samuel, when David is on the run from Saul, who wants David killed. In survival mode, he enters the tabernacle in a city called Nob, where he asks the priest for bread. The priest says, "I have no normal bread, only consecrated bread." David asks for these sacred loaves and goes on to eat what the scripture calls "the bread of the Presence." To eat the consecrated bread in this way was clearly a serious exception to the rule, or seen another way, a serious violation of Levitical law for that time & place.

It seems Jesus tells this story to the Pharisees to emphasize that rote obedience to rules does not ensure that we are in right relationship with God. After Jesus reminds the disciples that the sabbath is a ritual created to serve people, the Pharisees become petty & vengeful, calling out Jesus for healing a person with a withered hand, and then plot his death when he doesn't cooperate.

Jesus asks, "is it lawful to do good or bad on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" Is the sabbath created for us, or is the Sabbath a convoluted set of obstacles around which we must tip-toe?

As he often does, without diminishing the entire 'law' or 'tradition', Jesus offers to his peers an invitation to return to the essence of the tradition. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 3, "The letter of the law kills, but the Spirit gives life...And where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is

freedom.”

L'Arche & Freedom

This word – *freedom* – is a word that I associate with L'Arche.

In a fast-paced society that values speed & production, the practice of freedom in our homes often manifests itself as an interruption & an invitation to connect. In L'Arche, the core members – or the adults with disabilities – are often the most competent practitioners of this sabbath invitation. As an assistant caregiver, it is sometimes easy to cross everything off the list & tell myself that I've done my job. There are so many ways to hide within the work; perhaps some of you resonate with what I'm saying? You're busy at work, but your busyness is really a form of hiding? How easy it is to hide in our hyper-activity, in our busy-ness, in our tasks, in our record-keeping, in our cleaning of the dishes, in passing the meds, in signing the books– the list goes on & on. Obviously, these things need to be done, but if they get in the way of true connection, of those opportunities to share a joke or a tear or a greeting, then we miss the point.

About two years ago, I was at a L'Arche wedding. One of my former supervisors was getting married at a Catholic Church in Arlington. Many of the people in our community were present, including our two homes in Arlington. I was sitting in the front row next to a close friend, watching people file forward for communion. Part way through, Fritz came up and received the elements. And as he turned towards the outside of the pews to walk back, he instead approached the person next to me in the front row...he gave him a long, firm hug that lasted about 20 seconds, even though the two of them did not know each other that well. It was an act of freedom, a breaking of the norm, a divergence from the custom.

So often, it's these moments of surprise that bring us back to the whole point, that remind us that we are here for real

communion with each other, rather than our preferred sense of order.

I recently wrote a poem that was inspired by a few experiences that I had where I didn't expect the presence of God. It's a poem that revels in the unpredictability of Jesus. Coming from a conservative Lutheran background, where my grandpa was a pastor & my mother was a deaconess, there was a tight set of prescribed ways in which we could hear from God. And they certainly did not involve Cuban music or dance! (which was the initial spark for the poem.) The poem ends with a core member at L'Arche, with whom I began working. His name is Andrew. Andrew was a movie aficionado, a passionate reader of Sesame Street, as well as a true community builder and connector.

Oftentimes, when someone would enter a room, Andrew would grab your wrist & pull you to another person to shake their hand. It didn't matter if you already knew each other or if you had already shaken hands earlier in the day or if you lived together. Even though he was non-verbal, Andrew communicated to us the importance of greeting each other, fully & often. At the 8th Day service, when one of my children was baptized, Andrew was in full form, connecting us, placing hand-in-hand. Here is the final portion of the poem. [The text of the poem has been deleted at the request of the author.]

Turning Towards Each Other

Where The Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

Jesus' unpredictability is so refreshing. His path is so much more interesting & exciting than the one we'd take without him; we don't know where his will lead us. We only know from today's gospel that it will mean turning away from the structures & customs that don't draw us together. In the end, our work is radically simple. The Spirit is always in the process of helping us turn towards one another.

In a technological age, we are out of practice moving our

bodies to be fully present with one another. In our hyper-segregated country, we can float through life without becoming friends with people in prison, or people that are hidden away in an institution or a group home. In an age of polarization, how many of us are gathering at tables with those with whom we are politically opposed?

We live in a time of incredible loneliness, where young adults are as lonely as they have ever been. In the 1980s, 3% of men reported that they had zero close friends. Today, 15% percent of men report that they have zero close friends. We all know the pull of distraction, of turning to the sounds & bright colors of our screens. The contraptions in our pockets are designed to pull us away from each other. They offer us a shallow pseudo-sabbath, but the real sabbath is here, among & between us.

If we put ourselves in the shoes of the man with the withered hand, we can imagine that this Sabbath was perhaps the most meaningful of his life. He isn't really given a voice in the gospel story, but what if he extended an invitation to Jesus, what if he spoke up on his own behalf, what if Jesus was responding to an interruption?

Closing: An Invitation to Communal Sabbath

In 2019, Emmy Lu delivered the keynote address at our annual L'Arche fundraiser, she entitled it "A Sacred Supper." Watching it back, I was reminded that God's surprises do not happen in an empty vacuum. There are rituals & traditions that are essential to every community's well-being. There are some structures that offer the Spirit space to move. Gathering for dinner is one of these traditions in L'Arche. Each night, we gather at our dining tables and sit down for a meal. We put away our phones & computers, and we stop working. When we finish, we light a candle and pass it around the table.

This summer, I invite you to explore what communal sabbath

means for you: here at Seekers, or in your families, with your friends or your neighbors. Our society is configured for us to avoid each other, to silo ourselves, to be separate. This summer, can you surprise yourselves, and step outside of your algorithms? Can you follow Jesus in generating a broader & fuller we?

A Final Story

As I close, I want to tell one final story. I was particularly close to a core member named Mo Higgs. By a show of hands, how many of you knew Mo Higgs? For those who didn't know Mo, he was a short, white-bearded, curmudgeon (show picture). One of Mo's many means for connecting was that he had a nickname for everyone. He called Emmy Lu, "Luey", or "Grandma Luey!" If he didn't know you as well, he'd still call you grandma or grandpa or old fart or old turkey— something like that that would peg you down a notch. From the ages of 5 to 45, Mo lived in a terrible institution called Forest Haven, where people with disabilities were hidden away. Mo shared a room with 40 others, and had no privacy. He knew the cost of protecting his own space & belongings. Few people entered his room at L'Arche, until he got older and frail & needed others to come in & help him get dressed for the day. In his room, he had old, prized trinkets with special stories, pieces of candy, and two "baby cigars." As a former smoker, he was particularly fond of these cigars & fantasized often about the day when he'd smoke them.

For whatever reason, about a year before he died, he started calling Fred Taylor, *Cigar*. It became his name. I asked Fred if he was a cigar smoker, and he told me that he had never smoked a cigar in his life! Months before he died, Mo woke up one Sunday morning and said, I'm gonna give Cigar my cigar, and he did.

For all of Fred's accomplishments & history with FLOC, Seekers & Church of the Savior, I think Mo mirrored back to Fred his

identity in a way no one else could. Mo revealed to Emmy Lu & Fred & so many others who they were before God. With his strange nicknames & playful banter, he stripped away your credentials & shepherded you into a friendship where you were free, free to be called like Samuel, free to trust the words of the Psalmist with a strange newness.

The broader & fuller our "we" becomes, the more we will delight in the words of Psalm 139, in how true these words are of each person—

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works...My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance... How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them – they are more than the sand; I come to the end – I am still with you.

Amen.