

## **Dialogue Sermon - Sabbatical Entry Point - May 5**

### **Michele Ward - Andrew Foster Connors**

Luke 5:27-39

Michele: So how are you feeling about the sabbatical?

Andrew: I can't wait! Next week I'll head to my two week timber frame building class in the Berkshires assembling there with a group of strangers who will literally build a house together. Then a few weeks later I'll travel to the Protestant monastic community of Taize, France learning how they building community with youth and young people from around the world. Then our family will meet up in Norway where we will travel around that country completing some of the most beautiful and most challenging hikes in the world. It's going to be awesome.

So, Michele, how are you feeling about the sabbatical?

Michele: It's going to be pretty wild.

Actually, I'm feeling excited! I think a sabbatical is a good thing and not just for you. It's good to shake things up for all of us.

Andrew: Yes. I'm not sure if everyone knows this but sabbatical is a word that comes from sabbath. The sabbath command to rest. Scripture has two main reasons at the root for sabbath observance - one is that God rests after creation. God works six days and rests on the seventh.

Michele: The other is to avoid burnout. When we are not given the opportunity to rest, we tend to be taken advantage of, turned into production units - into slaves. When we don't rest and don't allow others to rest, we tend to devalue our own humanity and even the humanity of others. That's why sabbath keeping is a command and not a suggestion.

Andrew: Yes, then the Old Testament codifies this kind of regular disruption in a bigger way every 7 years, and then in a giant way every 7X7 years. That 49th year is the Jubilee when all debts have to be forgiven, so that the debt economy -which is really the slave economy - doesn't have a chance to overwhelm people in society. So a sabbatical is connected to all of these ideas. It's a programmed time of rest and renewal. A chance to take a step back from the day to day grind to notice how God is working in my life and in the life of the church. And that's what I'm hoping to do on this sabbatical - take a step back, refresh my sense of calling, my disciplines of reading, prayer, study, and writing before reentering on August 25.

Michele: And while I'm not going to rest in the same way, together as a congregation, we're going to have a similar opportunity to take a step back and notice who we are, how we function as a team, and what God is doing in our midst. And then, when you get back, I'm fading into the sunset and going on my own vacation!

Andrew: Amen. You know, Michele, when the Session wrote the grant that gave us some resources to do some things during this

sabbatical, we called it the New Wineskins Clergy Renewal Grant, connecting it to this passage that we read today. As a congregation we continue to explore this basic question of how should we organize ourselves in 2019 in a way that supports our notion that the Gospel in 2019 calls us to be a different kind of church.

Michele: That's one of the things that drew me to Brown: the willingness this community has to hold institutional structures loose enough to believe that God is doing something new all the time. I see this is the way that we highly value relationships. I see this is in the way we organize around relevant issues impacting our city and our world. I see this is our trust that God has our back, no matter what risks we take. And, when God is doing something new, God invites us to let go of what we thought we knew and create the future that we want to be our present. Community organizing calls this disorganizing to reorganize. I like to call it the Holy Spirit, but perhaps it's the same thing.

Andrew: Yes, and I think an ongoing challenge that we face is that people in our culture just don't approach church in the same way that they used to. The church's organizational structures are founded on assumptions that don't hold water anymore.

Michele: Yeah, no one ever wakes up in the morning asking the question, "Will I ever find the committee that's right for me?" And though many people don't attend church any more or don't have any experience with a church community, people still have

spiritual needs. Those needs do not disappear simply because people do not step into churches.

People are still asking important questions like, “What is the purpose of my life?” “Where is God in our hurting world?” “What am I called to do about it?” and “How can community happen when so many of us are divided?” But we can’t expect people to move to a neighborhood and say, “Hmm. Where do I find the local Presbyterian Church?” And those who do come to church aren’t necessarily joining a church so they can get “plugged in.” They’re looking for community, for a way to relate to God and others, for a place to belong.

Andrew: I can’t stand that language of plugging in. We are not appliances! The Gospel-- the good news that there is a God in the world who loves you and me and calls us to respond to that love with our lives-- is still just as relevant. But we have to be able to switch up how we do church in the world.

Michele: In the text today, Jesus seems like he’s talking about a radically different way of faithfulness in the world. He talks about not sewing a new patch on an old garment and not putting new wine into old wineskins. The emphasis is on the new thing. Although it might be the same shape or the same size as the previous wineskin, it is still made of new material by a different winemaker and filled with fresh grapes. In the text that new thing is Jesus’ way of faithfulness which seems like a radical departure from the old ways of being faithful.

Andrew: Yes, and I love the way that these parables arise out of a question that the religious leaders ask about partying. They ask, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” They seem upset with the kind of people that Jesus is interacting with. Later they point out that “John’s disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and pray, but your disciples eat and drink.” And Jesus says, you can’t fast while I’m around. You have to party. Life has to be lived!

Michele: Yes, and I don’t think Jesus says that fasting is bad. It’s more about the context. This context - the presence of Christ among us - calls for us to respond in a different way than we’ve been used to before Jesus showed up and changed the way we related to God and to each other. Later the disciples will fast, but when the times call for it. Right now, they need to eat and drink and share with others because the presence of Jesus calls for this kind of celebration.

Andrew: It’s made me think a lot about how flexible Jesus seems to be in what faithfulness looks like. He’s flexible with the people he encounters - people outside the religious establishment. And he’s flexible with the kinds of religious practices that he and his disciples engage in. Sometimes, it’s fasting. Sometimes it’s eating, drinking, fellowshiping. And I think we’re asking similar questions about how we are faithful as church in changing times. What need to change within me or within our ways of doing church so that we can still be faithful? Faithful in interacting people who may see themselves as outside of expected religious

norms. And flexible with what religious practice, worship, devotion, and action all look like.

Michele: So do you think we need more partying at Brown?

Andrew: Maybe. I mean if you look at our context right now - our city is a mess, our nation is a mess. And I think there are so many of us working really, really hard with an all hands on deck mentality to create major structural change. But at the same time, the threat of burn out - of giving up is real. And yet we have this extraordinary news, particularly poignant in Easter - that God is not the God of despair, but of hope. That our dead ends may seem that way. They may actually be dead ends if all we can bring to it is ourselves. But what if God's love really is stronger than our fears? And what if God really is present with new possibilities in our dead ends? Or more personally, what if God really does love you and me and our whole city?

If that's true, then we should be partying a little more, not as a substitute to all of our hard work, but as the foundation for it.

Michele: I get what you mean. There is a joy that comes in community. And maybe if we became a little more curious about how to nurture and cultivate that joy amongst us, we would actually deepen our faithfulness. We would bear more fruit not simply by working harder, but by nurturing that God-infused fire in our collective spirit.

Andrew: That's what I hope we can all be curious about during this sabbatical time. I'm going to be reflecting on that in these activities that I've put together - all of which center around the question of how people become community that creates something greater than if we were all just doing our own thing --Teams of people that accomplish great things together in a spirit of shared action, satisfaction, and joy. I'm hoping that by observing some of those places outside of traditional church circles, I can get some new and interesting insights for us as a community of faith.

Michele: Yes, and we've scheduled a number of things to help us get curious about this question in similar and different ways:

- Read one of the books Andrew is reading with the summer book group
- Attend the Ignite Talk June 9 about team building
- Listen to guest preachers Rev. Naomi Washington-Leapheart on June 23 or Rev. Dr. Ken Evers-Hood on August 4
- Worship in the Park and practice team building activities together July 21

Andrew:

Then we will all get back together toward the end of the summer, we'll have some things to reflect on together. Some new ways of

thinking about church. But also maybe cherishing more some of the ways we've already discovered that are working for us.

Michele:

Yes, I love the end of this text. "No one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, 'The old is good.'"

Andrew: It's kind of strange since it seems to counteract what was said earlier. It sounds like it's saying that old wine is actually better than new wine - which, it usually is.

Michele: I guess you could read it to say that change is hard because everyone is attached to their old ways. But you could also read it to say that if you want to make good, old wine, it has to start out as new, in new wineskins. You can't bypass that process. Good old wine doesn't start out that way. It has to be cultivated.

Andrew: Yes, every new generation, or every so often, the church gets updated assignments from God. And we have to figure out what we need to create together as a community to respond to those assignments - to answer those calls. We are forever listening for God's direction. And when we get clarity on that direction, we can't stay still.

As I'm beginning my part of this sabbatical, Michele, I want to acknowledge how grateful I am to you for your willingness to step in as acting Head of Staff while I'm away. We wrote this grant before you arrived last year and when I asked you during the

interview process about your willingness to lead through this period of my absence, you told me you saw this as an opportunity for the congregation and for you - for us all to continue to grow. I am so grateful to be able to step away and grateful to you and to the whole congregation for this opportunity.

Michele: Well, I meant it then and I still mean it now. It is a wonderful opportunity for us all. I am so excited about this sabbatical for you and for us. It will be a fun season to experiment and get to know each other in different ways. I am looking forward to pastoring with Rev. Gretchen van Utt and to working closely with the Session and the Sabbatical Team. I am confident that this will be a restorative, refreshing time for you and for your family. My prayer for you is that you fully experience the rest and celebration we talked about this morning. My prayer for us all is that the Holy Spirit opens up new ways for us to be and do life together this summer!

Andrew & Michele: Amen.

Andrew: May God bless you and keep you during these next several months.

Michele: May Jesus meet you on the road of your travels, opening your eyes to God's possibilities in the world.

Andrew: May the Spirit not only rest on each of you, but may it enliven, embolden, and nudge you into action.

Michele: In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, Sustain, Amen.