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What I am learning from sabbatical this time...

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I am currently on sabbatical. I am grateful for a little time to be excused from meetings and classes, to devote to my own rest and creative research. I recognize the privilege of teaching at an institution that has regular sabbaticals for all teaching faculty (thank you, Columbia Theological Seminary!), an increasingly rare situation in higher education, and one that is almost unheard of in other professions. It is an opportunity for pause that I wish for all working humans.

During these past few months, I have rested and read, traveled to visit family, and embarked on a new research project close to my heart. It has been both deeply restful and oddly disorienting.

Even as I have encountered the nourishment and the counter-cultural challenge of sabbatical, my colleagues at Columbia have been confronting similar themes as they engaged together the fine new book by my colleague Chanequa Walker-Barnes: *Sacred Self-Care: Daily Practices for Nurturing Our Whole Selves*. Dr. Chanequa has helped me name both the gift and the oddness of this sabbatical season, as a practice that is about “sacred self-care” as well as (and *therefore*) care for the wider community in which I live.

Importantly, Dr. Chanequa encourages me/us to see self-care not as selfish, but as grateful response to God. As she says, “Our self . . . is God’s first and best gift to each one of us. How

we care for ourselves is our response of gratitude for that gift” (16). In her discussion of sabbath as a necessary part of self-care, she reminds us, “Sabbath is a commandment right along with ‘Thou shalt not kill’ and ‘Thou shalt not steal’. . . . At its core, Sabbath is about ceasing from labor. . . . Sustaining self-care requires ceasing” (177). To make room for fresh ideas and fresh energy, I have to cease doing some things, at least for a season.

With both this book and my own recent experience on my mind, here are the lessons that I am learning from sabbatical:

- *Sabbatical is disorienting.* This is especially true this time around, as I no longer have children living at home to organize my days, and I did not come into sabbatical with a specific project already laid out to structure my time. I am without all the factors that usually and formerly structured my time: teaching, meetings, active parenting. Who am I?
- Without academic and parental external demands, *I gravitate toward other homely demands to provide a sense of accomplishment:* laundry, groceries, walking the dog. This is not to dismiss the importance of tasks traditionally sidelined and undercompensated as “women’s work.” Indeed, I concur with Kathleen Norris that God dwells in such “quotidian mysteries.” But it does highlight my tendency to find worth in what I have accomplished in a given day, what I can check off the list and pronounce “done.”
- Sabbatical has forced and invited me to ask myself anew: *What is it that I need to do—each day, in this season?* Dr. Chanequa points out that “Many of us have been taught that productivity is a sign of blessedness.” Guilty as charged. She goes on, “One way to maintain appropriate boundaries is to get clear about what is actually our work. In other words, what is required, and what is desired? Whose requirement or desire is it?” (96).
- To answer this question, sabbatical has helped me practice clearing space in my schedule—and making this space visible to myself on my daily calendar. *Too many little blocks on the calendar inhibit my creative work.*
- At the same time, *some regular embodied practices are necessary.* Blocking out mornings for research and writing, for instance, has helped me focus, so that I can then turn to other tasks in the afternoon. The puzzle of just enough structure is one I am still working out.
- In particular, I have rediscovered the *practice of free reflective writing* every morning. Just two pages by hand, in a journal with good paper, before I turn on the computer. This practice enables me to ponder on paper, just for myself, without the omnipresent editor that lurks off the margin when I am typing. And it has helped me connect different facets of my life and work. For example, my reflections in my previous blog emerged from just such morning reflections, on a recent experience of being a guest and its surprising connection with my own research questions.

What will I bring back to my teaching from this sabbatical time? I might encourage students to try this practice of writing for a few minutes every morning, separate from specific assignments. As it has done for me, it might help them integrate what they are reading and learning in the classroom with their lived experiences. As a byproduct, it may also therefore

nourish the theological integration that is a major learning goal in our introductory theology classes. In the end, sabbatical leaves me with this ongoing question: How can I be a teacher who does not define my students by their work, but truly teaches and embodies the truth that our worth precedes our work? How can sabbatical and self-care strengthen my explicit recognition of students as already shining images of God in the world, before they ever put pen to paper?

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