

Sabbatical Story

Mary Koon, September 30, 2018

Matthew 11:28-30; Deuteronomy 6:4-9

I am deeply, profoundly grateful to this community for the gift of three months in which to rediscover who I am apart from my work. Work that I love dearly, that feeds and energizes me.

My friend Megan, the professional storyteller, reminded me this summer that at its essence, a story is a narrative about an experience of change. We experience life was one way, and now it is another. We see this in all kinds of stories, from Jesus' parables to Harry Potter.

How was I changed, what insights were gained, and in a broader context, how might ministries be changed as a result of my time away? I think it's too soon to tell, but I return with energy and a willingness to create and play in this place.

I love Jesus' words in Matthew 11. The image of the yoke is wonderful – in the work of Christ, we are linked together, one with the other and with God. See! You were on Sabbatical with me! And Jesus' words about rest evoke images of quiet prayer, soft music, maybe a mystery novel on a porch with some iced tea. And, oh, how I respect that sort of rest.

This week, a commentary on these verses suggested that the Greek word for "easy" as in "my yoke is easy," could mean "fits well."

And thus, during my sabbatical I found rest for my soul.

The first week of sabbatical took place at Clearwater Forest as I facilitated a Girl Power Camp. I begin here because this week became the launching point for what became of the most important parts of my summer.

(Bold indicates photos) Elizabeth – Yoga teacher Elizabeth inspired me to begin yoga again. I practiced yoga for 8 years until it became impossible with my schedule. Every day that I was in town I spent an hour connecting breath and movement. It was a holy time – different and set apart. Each class encourages an intent – for me a prayer – that was sent out into the world.

Deb – Our own Deb DeMeester was a guest at camp. She brought paints and encouraged the girls to experiment and play with different types of paint. On a sabbatical years ago, Deb thought she'd be reading, but the spirit spoke to her and encouraged her to paint. And now she's a wonderful painter. Deb was my sabbatical advisor of sorts, encouraging me to listen to the spirit and pay attention, and to hold my "plans" loosely. All through the week, it was a gift to witness women living into their gifts and talents and encouraging the next generation.

Jogging – images of my favorite running spots this summer. I started jogging the winter of my freshman year in college to help me deal with a broken heart. Through the years, during runs, I've prayed, sorted out personal problems, memorized facts for seminary, written sermons ... trust me the sermons sound way better in my mind when I'm running than when they get down on paper! I stopped running almost 2 years ago in favor of walking, but picked it up again in June.

The gift of time, without rush to leave the house in the morning, to write, to practice yoga, to take a morning jog – it didn't help me feel like I "got into shape." Those practices, so close to who I am, helped me to feel more "me" again. And that brought me a sense of lightness in my being. I think and hope and pray that we all have practices - -things we like to do for no other reason but that somehow, they make sense to us. Practices that help us feel grounded and connected to God.

I hoped to dabble in a lot of different art forms this summer. I worked my way through The Artist's Way, starting each morning with 30 minutes of writing – nothing in particular, just thoughts in my head. The purpose of the exercise is to basically have a brain drain in order to be able to see and

experience the world through open eyes, ears throughout the day. The book is profoundly spiritual, and I was very faithful and reaped the benefits. I have never kept a journal because I found it to be too much pressure, but this wasn't like that. Author Julia Cameron's thesis is that we are all artists in our own way. That creativity is a gift from God, and using our creativity is our gift back to God. And so I wrote – about my joys, my gratitudes, my fears and shame. I was particularly glad for writing on my birthday – it was a difficult day for me as it was my first birthday without my father.

Photo of my porch – So I listened to the spirit, and instead of trying lots of different types of art, the spirit told me to paint. I spent 20 days, several hours each day, painting. I was drawn, compelled. The manager at the Sherwin Williams called me by name. Our little house was transformed and I reveled in delight as I selected colors. My hand ached, my back was sore, but my soul was at rest.

Photos of grandchildren/family One of the biggest focuses during my sabbatical was family. We babysat often during the week and sometimes on the weekend. (I did not have this as part of my plans – an unexpected delight and a lot of work!) We helped our son and daughter-in-law move into their house in Highland Park and welcomed their new dog. We moved our niece into her room at Macalester.

Photo of our dog riding in a car and the wedding of Laurie and Tyler Leonard: We interrupt this sabbatical to bring you a lost dog. Our dog had a huge adventure – she broke loose of our fence and visited the police department and was shipped to a local vet. She was super happy and we were a wreck! I “came out” of sabbatical to participate in the marriage of Laurie and Tyler. It was a joy.

Scripture song

The verse we read and the song we just sang were part of the experience at the Festival of Biblical Storytellers that I attended in Dayton – one of three sort of “classroom learning” experiences I had this summer.

Photo of nametag for Synod School -- Synod School. I participated in two classes at Synod School that will have an impact on Oak Grove. As the result of my participating in “Storytelling through Documentary Film” we will be joining with Valley Community Church on MLK weekend in January 2019 to host Presbyterian Disaster Assistance film screenings and conversations with award winning director, David Barnhardt. I will be using what I learned in a class on ambiguous loss and grief in a short class at the women’s retreat, Chrysalis, in February.

Photo of teacher at Biblical Storytelling Festival. On the highlights of my summer was attending the Festival of Biblical Storytellers. The mission of the Network of Biblical Storytellers is to encourage everyone to learn and tell Biblical Stories. I took a 101 class on the subject and I am a convert! The event featured an “epic telling” of 1 Kings – the building of Solomon’s Temple. Oh my. I’ve read those passages, I’m sure you have, too. They are pretty flat...this many cubits of wood, and angel facing west, etc. But listening to people TELL the story – wow! It was an entertaining as watching a movie. I laughed, I cried, I was enthralled for over two hours. I hope we can get a Biblical storytelling group started here.

Photo of stitching: I took a class at the Minnesota Textile Center on mindful stitching. Before you, you’ll see small pieces that each tell a story. Slow stitching is a process...the product is less important. I stitched pieces that told the story of family members, of the scripture we just read, of a walk in the woods. I hope to teach a class on this meditative practice at Synod School next summer.

Vacation Pictures: “Quittin’ time, quittin’ time.” That’s how the first sermon Jim and I heard as a married couple started. Bill Bennett at Trinity Avenue Presbyterian Durham NC. He said, “You can’t afford to get away?”

You can't afford NOT to get away!" Jim and I did not take that sermon to heart, though we quote it to one another often.

This September, we did get away, making up for the 36 years that we had other (legitimate and heavy) priorities. We cruised the Mediterranean with my brother and sister in law. Without email, telephone, the obligations of work and family, it was truly amazing.

I collected stories from the men and women we met and will share them all at some point.

Photo of grandchildren in worship: I did not neglect worship, but also did not anticipate that I'd be in worship with our grandchildren most Sundays. It has been decades since we were in church with little ones and, to all of you with small children who got up, got dressed, fed and made it here this morning. I admire you! We love you and we are so glad you are here. The photo on the screen captures the wonder that small children bring to worship. We need them!

Photos of book covers: Finally, I did find time to read. I'll be publishing an annotated bibliography of the books I read this summer.

This story, like the story of our lives, continues on. I look forward to hearing your stories and to finding new and creative ways to share them with one another. I am so thankful for you, for this place, and for the opportunity to rediscover myself this summer.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN