

“Sad Dad Music” The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond (6/11/2023, The Second Sunday after Pentecost)

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Always up and always forward
Cause I know I’ll never be
I’ll never be old
So how did I get old?

Now I’m just young in my head
Where do I go to feel like I’m there again?
Now I’m just young in my head
No time for wasting mine, for wasting mine

I remember in 2000
When I was just 28
Cause I’ve always been
I’ve always been that age

Moving on and moving forward
Cause I know someday I’ll be
Someday I’ll be gone
Someday I will be gone

The band: Starflyer 59. The album: “Young in My Head.”

The Genre is called “Sad Dad” music, or sometimes simply “Dad Rock.” Originally it was meant as a term of criticism, as though as those of us at the tail end of Generation X aged, the music we produced and listened to, especially if it began as harder, edgier music, tended to become smoother, softer, more melancholy, less transgressive—and very, very reflective and introspective, to the point of a near-obsession with our sense of self and the passage of time. “Uh-oh, dad’s got that faraway look in his eye again,” one might say of someone, perhaps even myself, as he puts in his earbuds and starts the playlist.

Sad Dad Music is probably best illustrated by the band Wilco, a band that also happens to be my favorite band of all time. Other bands in the genre include Death Cab for Cutie; The National; Arcade Fire; Counting Crows. Sad Dad music even made it into Taylor Swift’s oeuvre recently in the form of the album “Evermore,” particularly the song “Exile,” co-written and performed with yet another Sad Dad band, Bon Iver. In the spirit of transparency encouraged by Sad Dad music, I will openly proclaim: I am a sucker for Sad Dad music. I am the target demographic for Sad Dad music. I am the poster child for Sad Dad music.

Now, you may be wondering a lot of things at this point. One of those might be why people listen to sad music to begin with. Maybe you're someone who prefers your music upbeat, optimistic, and positive. Maybe you're also wondering one of your priests would embrace this melancholy and moody genre!

There was an article in the NY Times recently in which some researchers are tackling the question: why do people like sad songs? And the answer that they've come up with is that, while sadness in a song doesn't necessarily make us sad, it does enable us better to connect with the sadness of others. It makes us feel less alone in our own sadness and melancholy. It may actually help us develop an empathetic connection to others. As the article says, "our love of sad music is not a direct appreciation of sadness, it's an appreciation of connection."

I felt vindicated by this article! Maybe it's connection that I long for. And maybe that music is something that helps me develop the kind of emotional landscape I need to be myself and to be a priest, even!

Connection, after all, is something that we desperately need. I was reminded of this fact several times this week, just bubbling to the surface in my light perusal of social media. It's been 23 years since sociologist Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone* came out, a book in which Putnam detailed the loss of community and connection in American life. It's been three years since the pandemic that forced so many of us to lose connections to others in ways that are still playing out in our mental health.

And just this week, I heard yet another radio program about loneliness and isolation, particularly the loneliness of the American male. The percentage of men with at least six close friends has fallen by half since 1990, and one in five single men claims to have no close friends. Zero.

I also watched a Tiktok this week in which a single male detailed the course of his day. Wake up. Breakfast. Go to work. Come home to see dog. Back to work. To the gym. Back home for a frozen dinner. Watch TV. Go to bed and do the same thing all over again tomorrow. And while some commented that this was a pretty decent life, many observed what I, too, noticed: there was no other human being in the video. No connections. No friends. It seemed to me, at least, like a very lonely existence.

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

It should go without saying that Jesus built connection with people.

But maybe we should linger on this fact for a moment. While it does seem important for Jesus to have moments of solitude and prayer throughout the Gospels, nearly every time we encounter him, he is with this group of people that he has gathered around himself.

He is part of a community, a team, of friends and co-laborers. Jesus, whom we have rightly been extolling for the past few weeks as the Ascended and Glorified One, as the Word of Creation, as the Second Co-Eternal Person of the Trinity, was also a human being, after all.

And as a human being, he recognized that he could not work alone. He could not live alone. He desired and required the presence of others, the gifts of others, the laughter of others, the sadness of others. He needed and wanted human connection. Real human connection, with all of its ups and downs, its demands, its confusions and misunderstandings. Something about human connection was worth it to Jesus.

Jesus's desire for human connection is so strong, in fact, that it goes beyond our own understanding and expectation of who should be worthy to sit down and eat with Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity, God incarnate.

Perhaps we know this best through the eyes of Matthew, who tells the story here of his own encounter with Jesus in the third person; in other words, not "I was sitting at the tax booth," but "Matthew was sitting at the tax booth."

I would like to imagine that by the time Matthew's account of his time with Jesus was written down, Matthew was an old man, reflecting on this calling from Jesus. And I would like to imagine that, by then, Matthew had come to terms with the shame and the guilt associated with his presence in that tax booth. And with the friends and connections he had built around that life, a life of exploitation of his fellow Jews, a life of cooperation with the enemy, the Imperial Power of Rome. And into that life Jesus comes, and instead of shame and judgment and condemnation, Jesus offers Matthew connection.

Worthiness and connection are closely aligned in our psyches. In her extensive and important work, the Texas Episcopalian Brene Brown defines shame as "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love, belonging, and connection."

What Jesus offers to Matthew is the opposite of shame. He invites Matthew into his circle of friends and co-laborers. He invites him into the work of God, the love of God, the household of God, the fellowship and belonging of God.

Unfortunately, in this story, at least, the Pharisees offer shame, lumping together people like Matthew with the worst sorts of wicked people. Jesus, by way of contrast, welcomes those who are unworthy of love, belonging, and connection.

Jesus rejects shame, rejects the idea that worthiness is some kind of prerequisite, some ticket, some key that unlocks the love of God. All we deserve from God, in fact, Jesus says, is connection, warmth, compassion, and grace. And God desires that we extend that same connection, warmth, compassion, and grace to those around us.

Jesus will make this compassionate connection even more explicit in the next two interactions from our Gospel reading. He is interrupted in the midst of responding to the Pharisees by the leader of the synagogue, and he is interrupted in the midst of responding to the leader of the synagogue by the suffering woman. He heals her and calls her “daughter,” then he raises the leader of the synagogue’s daughter from death.

We are given two examples of Jesus’s mercy, the kind of mercy Jesus knows because it belongs to the Father. The Triune God shares this mercy, spoken of in the prophet Hosea, the hesed or lovingkindness of God. We might also translate the word as compassion, which means literally “suffering with.” Jesus suffers with those who come to him, like he suffers with us. He’s always connected to us in this way, even and especially in our sadness and grief.

These stories are nested, layered like an onion, surrounded by the calling of Matthew to be Jesus’s disciple. The calling of Matthew is a compassionate calling that in turn calls Matthew to the kind of compassionate life that Jesus models for us.

Think of us, too, as we just turned our bodies toward the reader of the Gospel story. As we turn toward the Gospel, we turn toward the Gospel. We turn toward Jesus’s compassionate calling that is simultaneously an inward and outward calling.

We turn toward the one who first turns toward us with connection and compassion. We receive that connection and compassion as the pure gift of God, and then we are enabled by the Holy Spirit to turn outward, as we go forth from this place, emboldened by that Gospel and by the Heavenly Food given to us to strengthen our bodies and souls for this work.

I encourage you this morning, as you approach the altar for Holy Communion, to kneel before Jesus and to ask him for what you need, just as the leader of the synagogue knelt before Jesus and asked for what he needed. Jesus’s compassion overflows in mercy, not sacrifice. In forgiveness, not condemnation. In connection, not isolation.

One of the best Christian poems in the English language is by George Herbert, an Anglican priest in the 17th century who died at the young age of 39. His poetry is, in some ways, the original Sad Dad music: witty, reflective, introspective, melancholy at times. In his third poem on Love, entitled “Love (III),” Herbert envisions a conversation with Jesus in which he claims to be unworthy to sit and have a meal with him. Unworthy even to serve Jesus at his table. He says that he cannot even look upon the loving face of God, he feels so shameful and unworthy, and Jesus replies, “who made the eyes but I?”

What a beautiful picture of the God who reminds us, in every way and in every season of our lives, that we are created in Love, that we are sustained in Love, and that we are redeemed in Love. So come, my friends, this morning: come and respond to the calling of the One who wants not only to eat with you, but to serve you at his Table.

AMEN.