



In That Forgotten Place:
A Conversation with Katie Nakamura Rengers
April 22, 2026

Adam Borneman: Friends, this is Adam Borneman with the Ministry Collaborative. And today I'm pleased to be in conversation with my colleagues Adam Mixon, Beth Daniel, and also a return guest and someone we work with quite a bit on a number of fronts, Katie Nakamura Rengers. An ongoing conversation for our staff, but I think among just clergy more broadly, is how we might reframe the way that we talk about busy-ness and rest, or centeredness and feeling fragmented, and just a lot of different ways of getting at this because it doesn't seem to be as simple as being really busy or not. It seems more complex than that. And we asked Katie to write about that for us recently on our blog, and was really pleased with how well received that was and really got some people thinking in a deeper way about all of this. So, we wanted to talk more about it.

I want to open, Katie, you quoted in your article this line from Ecclesiastes. And let's face it, anytime we have an opportunity to quote Ecclesiastes, we're going to take it.

Katie Nakamura Rengers: Absolutely.

Adam Borneman: You said, "Solomon reflects about humanity [in the following way]:

"I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil."

And part of what you wrote in this piece was that God has actually created us to enjoy our labor and the fruits of it. So, say more about, maybe Ecclesiastes, or just in general: what struck you as you were writing this piece?

Katie: Yeah. Like many people, I read Ecclesiastes once every decade. It doesn't come up very often, at least in the Episcopal Church's lectionary. And so, it's something that I would've just missed. It's a whole different tone of voice from the gospels, and the Psalms, and the rest of the Old Testament. There's something very conversational; it's kind of like musing. I imagine Solomon is older, and has lived out his kingly life and duties, and is in this space of reflection. And when I read that a few years ago, right? There's, like, nothing better than for people to enjoy themselves their whole lives long....that just really struck me. I think I read it when I was on an airplane, off on some business trip, to do what I thought might be important things. And yeah, I don't know if I believe it.

I'm a one on the Enneagram. I've got to be doing things right. I got to be doing things perfectly; probably, like, type A. I feel kind of worthless if I'm not accomplishing stuff. And so maybe it runs so counter to what I actually believe in my heart, and...which has been shaped by my childhood trauma and ministry and all of that...that it captured my attention. Right? What does God care about? Like, God wants you to enjoy yourself and be happy.

I think of this, too, when we think about, like, the state of the world that we're in, our country, wars and famines. And I hear Christian people struggling with the guilt of having it so good, struggling with the guilt of not being able to share that burden with the wider world. Like, "Why is it that I'm living this

great middle class suburban life, and children in Gaza are starving? Shouldn't I be sharing in that?" And, I think in this passage from Ecclesiastes, Solomon is saying, "No. God created us not necessarily for wealth and privilege, but God did create us for joy and enjoyment of life."

And so, that is the status quo. Like, that is the beginning point, not suffering that we have to climb our way out of, or not privilege that we have to prove our way out of.

Adam Mixon: That's really interesting, Katie, because I do read Ecclesiastes fairly frequently, and I wrestle with that passage quite a bit as well. Where is the center in all of that, where you, kind of, move in between acting responsibly and being sensitive and compassionate, but also finding some joy for yourself, which is challenging.

There's a certain amount of, even in my context, survivor's remorse that I feel for, despite doing ministry in kind of a tough spot, I am not; and my family is not. And should we choose, we could kind of insulate ourselves, and be in this little bubble or whatever, and just, kind of, be self-absorbed. But there's this constant tension between how much of a good time am I really allowed to have, versus how responsible and sensitive do I need to be to the needs of my neighbors?

And then you just blow that out and you start thinking about it on a global level, and it just seems like vanity, almost silly, for me to think about a vacation with my family, or spending time just doing nothing with my now grown children, or enjoying a movie, or...It's really a weird, funky place to be in. And at least for me, practically, the only way I've learned how to work through it is to stay sensitive to who's close to me, and to try to be present and do some good; because, my gosh, again, there's this constant onslaught of bad stuff happening. Part of me believes like we weren't meant to ingest that much information.

Katie: Right.

Adam Mixon: We're getting inundated with way too much stuff, and it can really make you kind of hopeless, and it just trivializes everything. And there are some voices among us who are like, "Why are we talking about having fun when...?" There's a lot of criticism going on for showing any type of joy, or enjoying anything. "How can you laugh at a time like this?" Or...The only thing I know to do practically is to try to help somebody in arms reach. If I see a need, respond to it as I can, and just keep on living. And if God blesses me with a moment where I can play, then to take advantage of it.

Katie: Adam, you're drawing this interesting visual for me, which is God calls us to have joy, and to have fun, and you can do that outside of the proverbial bubble. So, we don't want to live our lives in a bubble insensitive and unknowing of the needs of others and the experiences of others. At the same time, I also hear you saying maybe we weren't actually created to be so worried about things happening on the other side of the world from us. Like, our brains and our hearts and our souls are just not quite designed for the level of news, and for the level of sympathy for humanity all across the world. Not that we can't have compassion on that, but like our hearts just aren't big enough. And so, you're kind of saying, "What can we do except try to reach out to the people who are within arm's length?"

Adam Mixon: Proximity.

Katie: Proximity. Yeah.

Beth Daniel: You know, this conversation to me actually reflects the arc of Ecclesiastes overall, which is where this quote that we pulled out is placed, and is as shocking in the book of Ecclesiastes as it is to you, Katie, as you're saying right now. And Adam, I love that you've dropped the word "vanity" in your talk. I don't know if that was intentional, but the whole thread of Ecclesiastes is like, "Everything's vanity."

When I've taught on this, I've had people say, "I think this person was a manic depressive. It's so awful. I did this. I chased this and it was pointless. I did this and it was pointless." And then suddenly, there's this little beacon of hope or aspiration. And Katie, in your blog, I saw a lot of that reflected. Even though it was on a topic of busy-ness, I felt there was an element of confession in your blog about, "I actually want to be busy because that gives me worth and purpose and direction."

And then there was reflection on this passage and on the opportunity, "What else does God have in store for me?" And in a way, that's kind of the arc of this conversation. There's so much...There's like, "This is hopeless, this is hopeless, this is hopeless." And yet, we're not called to hopelessness. We're called towards a beacon of light and a beacon of joy. And I feel like we're wrestling with that in this conversation, and you were wrestling with that in your blog.

And I also wanted to point out there is an element in this, we should all eat, drink, and take pleasure, but it's also in the pleasure of our toil. There is work we're doing. We're not lying on a beach drinking cocktails and finding purpose. There's joy in the work that we've been called to do, which points a little bit to what Adam is saying about who are you called to minister to and what are you called to do.

Katie: Right.

Adam Borneman: Yeah, I think that calling piece is really important because a lot of the conversations I have, pretty frequently, I would say at least a couple times a week, are helping my colleagues out there. The question becomes, "Is how you're spending your time aligned with your call?" So, it's not so much, "Am I busy or not?" It's, "Is this the work that is mine to do?" And, granted, we all have some work that we have to do that may not fit that or may not be aligned well with that, but to more frequently step back and say, "Oh, well, this is why I'm feeling so drained and depleted. I am spending all of my time and energy and sympathy on stuff that's not really part of the call that God has placed on my life"; versus, you know, we all know pastors who are very busy, but also loving every second of it. And that's a very different way of enjoying the fruit of our labor.

One other thing I'll throw into the mix as I'm thinking about conversations I have with colleagues, I am continually struck by what an "aha" moment it is for them when I say, "You know, it is okay for you to go out and have fun. Even with people in your congregation, go have fun with them, take your leadership board out to a ballgame. Go out to lunch."

And they think, "Oh my God, yeah, actually we can do that. We don't have to do everything in a dingy, windowless basement, and call it ministry. We can actually just have fun together."

And maybe that's part of this conversation is just to announce that freedom to listeners to say, "It is okay for you to enjoy life, even with all the horrors of the world. You can find moments to enjoy, and thank God for it. That's not a zero sum equation. You can do both." So that's what comes to mind when you all are talking. Those two lines of thought with pastors is more frequently reassessing how much of

our time and energy is aligned with the call on our lives, but also reminding each other, and reminding ourselves, that it's okay to enjoy some things.

Adam Mixon: That's crazy, Adam, because what you are saying clicked in my head at just how challenging that is to remain disciplined and given to the work that your soul requires. So much of what we do in ministry, unfortunately – and this is not a judgment, and it might even count as a confession – is driven by sentimentality rather than spirituality. It's, "I'm moved by my feeling," rather than being moved by the Spirit. I want to respond to everything that comes up wherever there's a need, but you know what? I've got limits.

Adam Borneman: Well, and you're speaking specifically about feelings of needing to meet a need...

Adam Mixon: Yes. Yes.

Adam Borneman: ...or an expectation, or achieve something?

Adam Mixon: That's right. That constant drivenness to be responsive and realizing the limits of my capacity, which means, again, having clear definition as to what it is that I am called to, and to whom it is that I am called. Because I can't be, as Paul would say, "all things to all people." That's a crock. I argue with Paul over that all the time.

Katie: And our social media driven age, I think, contributes to that sentimentality. Adam Borneman, you said something a little bit ago about pastors being able to use their real gifts. And I wonder if sometimes the age of social media, and live-streaming, and having to post all these pictures, and make a statement about everything, is actually depriving pastors of the gift of using their real gifts, because we're sort of forced into a certain kind of gift. So the article I wrote, I told the story of how, around this time last year, I was laid off from the Episcopal Presiding Bishop's office. And that's a whole story in itself. But one of the things that gave me time to do during Lent 2025 was start to write down some of the stories of my ministry in Birmingham.

And I have a dear friend who's a social worker, and she subscribed to my Substack and read through all of these. And a few months ago, she and I sat down and had coffee. And she said, "Katie, these stories that you're writing down are not the stories of sermons you've given, or of activities you did with your congregation, or Bible studies, or presentations. The stories you've written down are these one-to-one interactions that you've had with people in your church and on the streets in Birmingham, and they meant something to you, but nobody else will ever see them. They won't be live-streamed. You're not going to get credit for it." And her point was, "They're these pure, spiritual, human-to-human moments.

That's just an example of something that our culture doesn't really incentivize or encourage. I would want pastors to feel some freedom to reflect on: What are their actual gifts for interacting with God's people? What are their real gifts for shepherding? Is it, like, giving these big inspiring sermons, talks? Is it being playful? Is it, like, going to the baseball game? Is it singing karaoke with their vestry right after the Easter Vigil? How can we, like, have the freedom to just more authentically offer those gifts, even if we're not going to get the big recognition and return?

Beth: And I think you're getting to the heart of what is a struggle for so many pastors: is to remember why we do what we do, and it is always to play to an audience of one. And that is so hard when we live in a world that has very different values and very different reward systems. But, of course, when you

slow down and you have these kind of conversations, of course God is delighting in those one-on-one ministry conversations versus, "Wow, you've got 50 shares and a thousand likes." I just don't think God cares about that at all. He cares about the impact of what we do. God cares about the impact of what we do. And we know this. We know this. We did not go into ministry for fame and fortune. We know this. And yet, here we are, being pulled and distracted and forgetful.

And what I loved about your piece, and what I love about this conversation, is none of this is new. We know exactly what we're talking about, but it takes slowing down and rejecting that busy-ness badge. I think you called it "the problem of the American Protestant work ethic", which I kind of loved, because it is a major problem. But, gosh, thank you for not only using the text to challenge us on, "Hey, it's not all doom and gloom," but also, "Hey, remember who you are and whose you are and why you're doing what you do. "

Katie: Yes.

Adam Mixon: Yeah. That pressure you speak of? Oh, man. Katie, we share the same neighborhood, so you understand well. I have been – I don't know if it was a compliment, an accusation, it was well-intended, whatever it was, but it was, "Why are you hiding over here? You could be..." or "You should be ..." And I think about over the last 25 years, and the only reason I showed up in the space in the first place is because I was called to it. It wasn't with the next step in mind. It was to these people, and these few blocks, this housing community for this period of time, for as long as God says so.

Yeah, it's just different, the pressure to always be looking beyond. And again, people think they're meaning you well by trying to push you toward this or, "you should be..." And when the truth of the matter is, I was called to these people at this place for this period of time. In your estimation, it's a couple of blocks of housing projects, but for me, it's the work that God has...and how do you measure that?

Katie: Right. Our gospel last Sunday was the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, and I'd never put together the little bit that comes right before it, which is the accolades: "Jesus was baptizing more people than John the Baptist." And then, it puts in parentheses, "Well, actually, Jesus wasn't doing any of the baptizing. It was his disciples."

Jesus had wandered off to the well to go talk to this woman. And so it begins with that thing that, right, is incentivized and rewarded and, "Oh my God, all right, more followers than John the Baptist." But that's not where Jesus is. That's not where his interest is. He's in that forgotten place, like you're talking about, Adam.

Adam Mixon: Wow.

Adam Borneman: You know, so much of this conversation is reminding me of one of our board members and facilitators over the years, Jack Fortin, has written a lot about this, and talks a lot about how it's not really about having a balanced life. It's about having a centered life. It's not about balancing busy-ness and restfulness. It's about being centered. And Katie, you know, that passage and your really wonderful insight there about Jesus and the woman at the well makes me think about..that really puts a fine point on that theme throughout this conversation, which is it's about always pursuing that center where there is joy. As a good Presbyterian, I'm thinking here of, "The chief end of humanity is to glorify God and enjoy God forever." And I think it's okay for us to do that, to find our center, to be aligned in our call, to

be deeply rooted in it. Even when it's hard, even when we're pulled in lots of different directions, there's something really beautiful about being in that space.