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Musical Rest

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

Critics can be cruel. While criticism itself might be helpful if handled respectfully, constructively, and honestly, there are times when criticism is just a blind cover-up for fear of losing something or fear of change. If we pay attention to criticism, it can sometimes reveal a great deal about the critic themselves.

Such was the case when nature writer Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* was published in September 1962. Ms. Carson's book, which is still in publication today, is considered a monumental work that has had a major impact on our country and the world. It was a courageous book to write, as Ms. Carson deviated from her usual field of marine biology to write about her observations of the negative effects of the synthetic chemical pesticide DDT had on the native bird populations. Her challenging observations didn't just affect insects and birds, she was also questioning the culture of her time that proclaimed, "better living through chemistry" and used chemical science to exert dominance over all creatures of the earth. Ms. Carson argued it was unwise to decide which animals or insects could live or die based only on human comfort, and argued that humans needed to study the interconnectedness of the natural world and our human lives and consider long term affects before making any decisions.

That most of us have heard of this idea in one form or another speaks to the influence of her book. But of course, there are always critics. Most of Ms. Carson's critics were from the biochemical engineering companies. One biochemist who worked for a company that manufactured DDT called her a "fanatic". Another critic who worked with the US Agricultural Dept. wrote the president that he had decided that because Ms. Carson was not married, and was (in his opinion) physically unattractive, she was "probably a communist," and therefore should not be listened to.

This criticism seems to have very little to do with Ms. Carson's observations and seems to be more about dismissing her theory by dismissing the person who came up with it. Perhaps the men who made the criticisms did not want to face the possibility that the product they had made or used could cause harm, and, even worse, that the very philosophy of American life at the time, that prosperity and health were possible through the creation of new artificial and synthesized chemicals was threatened made them afraid.

Ms. Carson's work remains influential today, and her critics still exist too, most of them are now the ones dismissed by credible scientists, but it goes to show things can and do change. What hasn't changed is that there is still plenty to be learned about the critics from their criticisms.

While we don't get to meet the critics in our Gospel today, scholars tell us that Jesus' opening words are his response to being rejected by the very people he came to be with. His words about the generation or people refusing to engage in the two activities of children in the market: dancing to music or grieving can suggest the criticism he and John the Baptist received. It seems people refused to listen to John the Baptist because his message of the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven was so harsh, and his lifestyle was too severely aesthetic, people dismissed him as a crazy person. Yet when Jesus proclaimed the same message with celebration, eating and friendship, he was written off as a drunk.

Perhaps many of the people of Jesus' time for whom the message of the coming Kingdom of Heaven was for just didn't want to hear about anything that would change the status quo, what they felt comfortable with and certain about. Perhaps there was something too challenging in both the message of John the Baptist and Jesus that folks wanted to avoid rather than confront. Perhaps the message of repentance made people uncomfortable; maybe they didn't want to face what they had done wrong, or the sin in their own lives. And perhaps the message of Jesus that God is love and heals and forgives and expects all of us to forgive and be part of healing is also just too much change, because maybe folks didn't want to reflect on what needs healing in their lives or what forgiveness requires of them. Perhaps the religious elite were not willing to listen to any teaching that contradicted their own or acknowledge any observation that challenged their status. Perhaps they were holding out for a Messianic hero that they could control or who met their requirements rather than accept a Messiah who is humble, who came to help people carry their burdens instead of magically take them away.

Not much has changed today when it comes to receiving the message of Jesus and the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus is still able to make people uncomfortable, and as we follow Jesus as best we can, we might find, as Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, sin is still terribly difficult to deal with. It is still all too easy to find ourselves blaming others for our suffering, for being selfish instead of grateful, afraid of losing what we have instead of generously sharing, of holding onto hate and anger instead of forgiving, of insisting on our own way

instead of prayerfully asking for God's guidance. In addition, we still find ourselves experiencing hardships, be they spiritual, financial, personal, or professional; we still have accidents, there are still tragedies that happen for no reason we can see or understand.

And perhaps that is why the last words we heard from Jesus in today's Gospel have been the source of comfort for so many Christians for thousands of years: the words of Jesus calling for all who are weary, who are carrying heavy burdens to come to him for rest. Notice that Jesus doesn't promise to take our burdens away. He doesn't call people to come to him to give him their burdens, but to rest and to take his yoke. A yoke, for those who might be unfamiliar, is a farming implement that allowed an animal like a horse, donkey, or ox to pull a piece of equipment for plowing or harvesting behind it. There were yokes made for one animal, and that animal had to be very strong, for it pulled all the weight of the equipment behind it. There were also yokes made for two animals. These yokes made it possible for two animals to share the workload, making it less stressful on one animal and often the work was done in less time.

This is what Jesus' call in this Gospel is about, a rest that is possible through shared work; Jesus himself is asking to share our cares, our worries, our stresses, our hopes, our healing, our passions, our forgiving.

If that sounds hard to imagine, perhaps it might help to think of the rest Jesus offers as a musical one. For those of us who have ever sang or played a musical instrument, whether professionally, or in a school choir, band or orchestra, or in a volunteer choir, band or orchestra, we surely know what a rest is. My favorite definition of a musical rest is "knowing when not to play." It is the time when one section or singer or musician doesn't play or sing. But, a musical rest is not a time for a restroom break, or snack break. It isn't a time to pull out your smart phone and check the score of the baseball game. A rest does not mean the song is over for the singer or musician who isn't playing. The song is still going on; and the singer or musician who is resting must remain just as engaged as when they were singing or playing; they still have to count the beats, watch the conductor, and listen to what is going on around them. For where they come back into the song is important. Rests make it possible for the piece of music to be shared by all the musicians and let some sections be highlighted at different times. Any singer or musician can feel confident to take the rest written in the music because they know the other musicians and singers will do their part, and

together, playing together and resting, all the musicians and singers contribute to bringing life to notes on a page, and a song is born again and again.

I believe this is the type of rest Jesus calls those of us who follow him into. It is a rest that brings renewal of life, even eternal life. It isn't checking out from the challenges, opportunities, difficulties or even the joys and celebrations of life. Neither is it taking it all on individually, is a sharing of the load, of not just walking with Christ, going where he calls us to go, but letting him walk with us, sharing what we love and fear, what we worry over, our disappointments and our joys. And if we are able to do this, I believe we will find those fears less monstrous, the things we love far more easy to share, the worries less troublesome, the disappointments endurable, even the critics we will undoubtedly encounter will be less menacing, as they all will be transformed in ways large or small into something holy through the love of God in Christ who by sharing our journey and loving with us and loving through us, into something that is not ours alone, but God's.

Perhaps the first step in living this life of faith is to answer Christ's call with prayer. To ask Christ into every part of our lives and through practice let him share our loads. I've had the fortunate blessing of friends who remind me this isn't something we do just once, as Paul wrote, it can be our nature to take back that which we asked Christ to share with us and go back to trying to carry it alone, and when we find ourselves weary and in need of rest that can be a sign Jesus is waiting to help us, perhaps through our neighbors, and we can once again let him carry our load with us, finding the load less of a burden and more of a holy endeavor of God.