

Proper 9A July 5, 2020
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Rest for our Souls
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Matthew 11:28-30

It has been said it is no accident that back in Genesis, the first book in the Bible, God completed creation by resting. In doing so, God established a pattern for God's people that we can see evident not only in the stories of the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, but in Jesus' life and ministry. As we read through the Gospels, we notice there are times when Jesus removed himself from the work and activity he was doing and from those following him, to go off to a place by himself to rest and pray. Sometimes, like when Jesus was sleeping in the bow of a boat during a storm, it seemed like he picked unusual times to rest. But whether or not we agree with Jesus' timing, throughout the Gospels there are times when Jesus showed us with his actions that it is important to stay in the pattern God established at the world's creation.

Yet resting may be easier said than done. Before we found ourselves in the midst of a global pandemic, we all had plenty of activities and obligations to keep us busy. Whether the activities were for entertainment, errands that needed to be done, work, school, hobbies, social justice, family, or church, many of us found ourselves going from meeting to meeting or event to event day in and day out. We'd struggle to find time for rest or relaxation. Perhaps some of us even convinced ourselves some of those activities were restful while others took pride in the amount of work we did every day or every week or every month.

The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor preached about her pride in getting things accomplished in a sermon published in her book *The Seeds of Heaven Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew*. She said she loved her long lists of tasks that needed doing and the tremendous satisfaction she took in crossing items off that list. However, the more tasks she accomplished, she added even more items to her to-do list, so that it grew longer, not shorter. Until the morning she woke up and couldn't get out of bed because her back hurt so much. The pain was so severe

she couldn't get out of bed for a week. So, she spent seven days (the same number of days God it took God to make the world in the creation story) watching dust accumulate on that long to-do list and began to learn to appreciate being still, watching the sunlight move across the wall in her room, learning to trust things will get done, even when she wasn't controlling them. She said such an extreme is what it took to remind her of the value and necessity of rest.

Perhaps some of us can relate to Barbara Brown Taylor's experience; how the good feeling of accomplishing something can become addictive, so that we want to accomplish more and more. Maybe we can all relate to resting in the satisfaction of work accomplished.

One of the many things the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed is how the church and its leaders – myself included - often rest in the comfort work brings. In the earliest days of the pandemic I watched as clergy scrambled to set up on-line services. Those of us who don't have the technology to support that work had to work to find ways to record sermons and prayers. I found myself recording little reassuring talks and reflections in addition to my weekly sermon. Maybe some of you watched them. Maybe they were helpful. I hope they were. But part of me felt like I was contributing to the inundation of information on-line more than being faithful. It felt like so many of us were scared, worried, or anxious and we shushed those feelings with what is all too often our go to solution: work. And we worked hard. But no matter how hard we worked, we couldn't end the pandemic, save the church, each other, or our relationship to God.

In one of the many zoom meetings I found myself in during the early days of the stay at home mandates, I heard someone talk about the importance of rest. This person reminded me rest was something God created, just like God created the world and everything in it. Rest is part of God's creation and is something God intended for God's creation. To not rest, therefore, is an act of rebellion against God. It is to act contrary to how God intended the world to be. To refuse to rest is to say we know better than God that we trust in our own work more than we trust in God, which makes refusal to rest a sin against God, a refusal to love God.

I had not thought of rest through that perspective before, and I found it deeply sobering. It made me realize none of us had to respond to the stress of the pandemic by overworking and overproducing. Instead, we could have followed Jesus and rested in God.

Too often I wonder if we think of rest as only refraining from work. But the Biblical understanding of rest is much more theological. Rest is an aspect of faith. In scriptures, rest means trusting in God and our relationship with God. Rest means trusting that all creation is in God's hands. Rest is the humble acknowledgement that salvation is God's work, not mine. Such a burden was not meant for humanity alone.

That is perhaps what is behind Jesus' words in today's Gospel. For hundreds of years these words have brought comfort to so many people. Jesus' promise of rest is rooted in answering his call to follow him. The first part of today's full Gospel reading has Jesus talking about those who refused to answer his call, like busy adults who refuse to join children in play and laughter. Sometimes I wonder if we ever imagine what it made Jesus feel like when people ignored him or refused to follow him. However it made him feel, today's Gospel ends with the promise that those who do follow him will find rest for their souls because his yoke is easy and burden is light.

This promise can be deceptive in that it might make someone think following Jesus means there will never be any work to do nor any obstacles or changes to face; that life will never be difficult, challenging, or disappointing. But that is not what Jesus promised as those of us who read the scriptures and read about people who follow Jesus during especially difficult times like Harriet Tubman, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mamie Till-Mobley, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the clergy in Rwanda during the genocide, Terry Waite, even some of the first priests and bishops who are women and people of color in the Episcopal Church, and so many more people who show us following Jesus does not guarantee a conflict-free life. Following Jesus means following him even when the world is changing.

So where does the ease Jesus promised in today's Gospel come from? It comes from the yoke he mentioned. A yoke is an old farming device that yoked or linked two animals together so that they could bear a heavy load together, making it easier on each animal than if they had to do it alone. By moving together, the yoke made it so no one carries the full load alone. You might say a yoke symbolizes being in it together.

That is what Jesus is promising. That by following him, we enter a relationship with the one who is greater than we are, who is willing to share the work of following him. And that is where we can find comfort in Jesus' promise today.

Which means when the pandemic started, we clergy and lay leaders certainly *did* have to do the work of adapting to an on-line format, however that looked for each parish because things had changed, and we needed to adapt to the change. But we didn't have to take on the burden the change caused by ourselves. We certainly could have stopped and taken time to rest in trusting God has us instead of feeling anxious and worried about what we will lose and have lost due to the changes we had to make and continue to make.

Perhaps for some of you reading or watching this sermon, this has been a good story, but not one you can relate to. Perhaps the change had a different impact on you, and you found yourself having many activities and work taken away as we were all told to stay at home with nothing to replace them. Perhaps some of you have been feeling bored, with not enough to do or that you are getting to do things you haven't had time for. Maybe you're enjoying it so much you don't want to go back to in-person activities because you are enjoying the break from activity so much. Others might getting restless, and ready to return to the work of sharing God's love.

There is a lot to learn in that too. Remember, rest isn't just a cessation of labor, it is resting in God's love, trusting God has all of creation in God's hands no matter what is happening. Perhaps the disparity of experiences is something to pay attention to. Perhaps those of us working too much can find ways to ease up, and those who find themselves with more time on their hands than they know what to do with might think about ways they can pick up some of that yoke, sharing the work so that the load is easier on all of us. And if that sounds frightening, there are ways that work can be done safely. That is part of the changes many of us have been working hard on, adapting ministries to fit the new reality we find ourselves in. And if that sounds uncertain or worrying, remember we aren't alone, we can find comfort by resting or trusting in Jesus' promise to share the work with us.

It is important to remember the yoke of Jesus is not shared by Jesus and only one person. Certainly, that is part of what Jesus was talking about, that you are not alone, but there is more to it than individualism. Jesus shares that yoke with the entire Church, the Body of Christ, all of us followers of Jesus together. That is the unique community Jesus is calling us to, believers who do the work together to bring the Kingdom of Heaven to deeper reality here on earth. Its good work and sharing it with Jesus can give rest for our souls and show the world what God intended for us all from the beginning.