

June 2, 2024

Sermon by Rev. Janice K. Reynolds

Matthew 11:28-30 - Common English Bible Translation

²⁸ “Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Put on my yoke, and learn from me. I’m gentle and humble. And you will find rest for yourselves. ³⁰ My yoke is easy to bear, and my burden is light.”

I would say we are all in need of a good rest. No matter our lifestyle or life circumstances.

Rest from worry about our family or friends.

Rest from fear of what this world may bring.

Rest from tending the house.

Rest from a relentless inner critic.

Rest from people who annoy us.

Rest from institutional weariness.

Rest from compulsion, whatever that may be for each of us.

Rest from loneliness.

Rest from dashed hope and disillusionment.

Rest from the day-to-day grind.

Rest even from the delight of countless engagements on the calendar.

There is this deep desire for Rest in each of us.

A summer of delight in heart’s desire. That is the overarching theme of our worship this summer as Pastor Sarah follows her and her family’s longings.

Our desires can be a gateway to what really matters. Our heart’s desires give us clues that lead us to our most authentic selves. Yet, we often tamp down our desires as if they are ill-timed hopes that have to be quelled. As Wendy Farley, Professor of Theology at San Francisco Theological Seminary says, “desire is a trustworthy magic lamp that never goes out! Our desires can orient us to what is good... provide enormous soul energy, directing us to our greatest needs and giving us the energy to follow up on our longings.”

Yet most of us desire a type of rest or peace in our everyday life that can feel elusive.

In our society we have a tendency toward action! We work for peace, we care for our loved ones, we strive for good relationships, we earn our living. Work is a good thing! It is how we actualize our vocations and make our livelihood. But tireless striving, worry and fear are soul killers.

Jesus and his crew were on the road, continually bombarded by people and their requests. Jesus almost always turned and tended to them, listened to them, healed them, fed them. He and his followers were at odds with the authorities who saw them healing and caring for people even on the Sabbath. That put them under tremendous stress day in and day out.

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And yet, Jesus says, “Come to me,” addressing the many hard working and struggling people longing for a new way. “Come to me and I will give you rest.” Jesus can’t save them from their daily grind. But he promises that by following in his way of gentleness and humility, they will find rest for themselves.

Just before this passage, Jesus is noticing how the religious authorities are admonishing the people to work more to be holy and good – in other words, a context not unlike our own where our culture puts pressure on us to scramble to be seen and measure up. It’s OK to chill out some, Jesus is saying. In your workaday life, take a tack of gentleness and humility rather than working so hard to be good.

Jesus’ invitation to rest disturbs the status quo. It’s a threat to the way things have always been. He knew that he and his followers also needed rest, healing and nourishment so they can continue their work. This message was as revolutionary in Jesus’ time as it is in ours.

Something to ponder: What is the status quo in you, that causes continual internal or external motion? Do you have inner voices telling you that you don’t deserve to rest or can’t afford the break? Are your inner thought patterns driving you to distraction? Are you hijacked by a calendar schedule that just doesn’t quit? (Pause)

Now, here’s a revolutionary thought! What if we could infuse each day with rest, peace, and beauty, while we are engaged in the activity of life, while we are doing whatever we are doing? What would this look like?

“Come to me, and I will give you rest” Jesus said to the people. Maybe we, too, can give it a rest.

I recently took an online class with Professor Wendy Farley, who I mentioned earlier. It was based on her recent book, *Beguiled by Beauty: Cultivating a Life of Contemplation and Compassion*. She suggests ways of being we can cultivate in the midst of whatever we are thinking and doing and with whoever we are relating with. Ways we can rest amid everyday life.

Rather than seeking an escape, she suggests that contemplation of beauty and goodness is a way to commune with God, giving us rest in God wherever we are. While meditation and prayer are a way into rest for many, there may be more of us who need other ways to find rest in God. Wendy encourages us to keep ourselves human in the face of suffering, fear and evil by recognizing our own belovedness in God’s eyes and coming closer to God through new habits that help us open our eyes to beauty, even through darkness and fear.

She advocates investing in soulful rest in everyday life through cultivating certain attitudes that help us be more compassionate, patient and resilient, and allow us to recover our energy. The rhythm of contemplation and action go hand in hand. “By paying attention to our habitual attitudes, we begin to notice more beauty and goodness, and have more compassion.”

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Here are a few of these fresh attitudes Wendy suggests we cultivate to find rest every day.

The first is Gentleness

Like Jesus, we can relax into gentleness, which allows us a little space to pay attention to what's happening and silence our mental noise. If we find ourselves being harsh, we can loosen up, take the edge off our interactions. Overtime we will become gentler with ourselves too, and find rest in each other's presence.

A related attitude we can try on is Nonjudgment.

How many times do we jump to conclusions about another person or situation? Instead, we can create a small resting space, where we can simply be who we are, and not try to rush into action or judgment. We can pause, and simply pay attention with curiosity and openness. Imagine how much more restful that might feel for everyone.

We can also learn to practice Peacefulness and Relinquishing Control

As scary and out of control everything seems right now, we each have the freedom to step back a bit and experience some equanimity in the face of what is going on. This quality of letting go allow us to experience humility in the way of Jesus: we needn't inflate our egos or succumb to despair. It is possible to maintain a sense of peace for everyone's sake. Whatever happens we can lean into the gracious presence of God and lend our calm to others who are in stress.

Wendy Farley also advocates two related practices, Wonder and Adventure... what better time to practice these than in summer recreation!

Wonder

You remember wonder! Dazzling sunsets, falling in love. Wonder is the feeling of wakeful amazement with a childlike curiosity: fresh astonishment at a spring flower, noticing a twinkle in a child's eye or the beautiful curve of your loved one's cheek, or bird song. Wonder brings us out of our own preoccupations and appraisals, our false self retreats for a while, and we feel receptive to events, places and people in a way not possible before. We quiet ourselves to rest in the beauty within and around us.

And Adventure...

We all live a life of uncertainty and risk. It's always been that way. If we live life with a spirit of adventure, we develop enthusiasm for life, a disposition to relish our life in its grandeur and beauty, in its diversity as well as it's painful losses. We become willing to have our heart broken so that life doesn't pass us by. We notice it all and taste it all. Then, our faith begins to increase as we realize that bad things don't always happen, and as we recognize that our deepest desires for beauty and love will be met by God's infinite goodness. Life becomes, in Wendy's words, "an everlasting ode to joy."

These dispositions are described in more detail in a handout I have for you today, in Wendy Farley's words. You can refer to it this month as we explore the theme of Rest, perhaps choosing one each week to practice.

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I also want to invite you to attend a new class series of St. A's spiritual formation group, meeting 1st and 3rd Wednesdays, beginning this week. Led by Amy Houchen, we will learn a practice that brings us more meaning and joy in everyday life, and yes, rest. Drop-ins are welcome! Please see the announcement in the bulletin or e-news.

Fresh dispositions or attitudes toward life can increase our daily peace, joy, and awareness of the Sacred in our everyday lives. Try it! Find the rest you long for.

I can't help but think that this is what Jesus was getting at. He asked his disciples and followers to pay attention to how he does it: Jesus worked hard, but he did it from dispositions of humility and gentleness, so he wouldn't get so worn out and think it was all up to him. He gathered others to work with him. And he called them away to rest with him and in him. When we take on the yoke of service in the way of Jesus, we experience rest and refreshment even as we work and care for others.

I think we can also learn from younger generations – everyone here can look to a younger person in your life; I look to my daughter for inspiration. It's been said that many "younger people" don't have a strong work ethic, a gross generalization to be sure. Another perspective is that many younger people prioritize relationships, care of their soul and body, and flexible schedules. Many don't value blind striving. The fruits of this shift in priorities and perspective seem to be increased creativity, life satisfaction, and moral strength perhaps leading to a kinder world.

Today we partake in the Sacrament of Communion. As Psalm 62 reminds us, we rest in God's presence that gives us strength and faith for the journey. The ritual of Communion shines light on the beauty in fundamental gifts of nourishing food and good company, never to be taken for granted.

As Wendy Farley reminds us, "we cannot love the world without courage and without sustained resources to feed our courage. The very word "courage" comes from the word for heart. If we want our heart to live, we must feed it and nourish it. Contemplating the beauty of beings is one way to do this – in the ordinariness of life..."

So, let's follow our desires into God's heart of rest. This summer, I invite you to notice beauty and goodness throughout your day. See how life itself becomes a Sabbath, resting in God minute by minute, day by day. What a relief to take a rest.

Worship Resources:

Call to Worship: Psalm 62 – Excerpt from Psalms for Praying by Nan C. Merrill

Call to Confession: Lord of the Sabbath © 2019 Lisa Ann Moss Degrenia

The Sermon was inspired in part by the book *Beguiled by Beauty: Cultivating a Life of Contemplation and Compassion*, Wendy Farley, and a class taught by Professor Farley.