

“Rest and Renewal”
July 30, 2023

Isaiah 40:21-31
Psalm 102:1-12
Matthew 11:28-30

We’ve been reading through the middle section of the Gospel of Matthew in recent weeks. And today, *at last*, we come to some welcome and comforting words.

After Jesus instructs his disciples;

after he charges them to teach and heal and announce that God is drawing near;

after he sends them out with the word, “Go”

Jesus offers an invitation: “*Come* to me...and I will give you rest.”

After speaking woes and denunciations;

after talking about hating families and taking up the cross;

after announcing that he has come to bring not peace, but a sword

Jesus claims “I am gentle and humble of heart.”

These words fall softly on those who have weary hearts and are worn out by life. They come as a relief to those who want to do the right thing and are burdened by their conscience. They light up the path ahead like sunshine after days of rain for those who live in the shadows of guilt and remorse.

That is to say, *these* are the words that *you* have been waiting to hear.

“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 have gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

If we could just let those gracious words flood over us, my task this morning would be as easy as the yoke of Jesus. All I would need to do is speak these words of comfort and reassurance to you once more and send you out early into this beautiful July day.

But let’s not sing that final hymn just quite yet!

As is always the case, there is yet more truth and light to break forth from these words.

Let’s first recognize that those words of Jesus move us to confession. While Jesus tells us that his yoke is easy and his burden is light, we in the church have so often been ready to place heavy burdens on others—and even upon ourselves!

The New Testament tells of early Christians quickly wanting to regulate what people ate and how they dressed.

Women were apostles and deacons, but soon the church told them, “Those are not options for you.”

After finding religious freedom in the New World, the faithful quickly began codifying their religion as law. And, as we have seen, even here in Iowa, there are Christians who want to put the yoke of their faith on the shoulders of everyone as they restrict abortion rights for women.

And let’s be honest: there is even the danger in liberal, thoughtful congregations such as this one that we will seek to have everyone thinking the same thoughts. We can respect *questions*. The challenge comes when we have to respect the different *answers* that people discover.

Our confession helps us understand those who want to throw off the heavy yoke of religion.

Those who avoid religion and its perceived strictures are usually responding to some awful experience with those who would impose their way of thinking and acting onto others. Maybe you know people like that. Maybe *you* are someone like that. There are those in this congregation who kept themselves away from any church for years because it was specifically *in churches* that they were told there are limits on what you could think and what questions you could ask. It was specifically *in churches* that they met with intolerance, or bigotry, or pathological control, or abuse. It was *in churches* they found a hard yoke and a heavy burden. When they finally stumbled across this place and found the courage to walk through our doors, they were surprised by what they found: a community of openness, a church that seeks to live in the freedom of the gospel.

We don’t always get it right, you know that. But we seek to follow the Jesus whom we see again and again in conflict with the religious leaders of his day. He speaks out against those who worry about religious details while ignoring or avoiding the weightier demands of love, compassion and mercy. He warns against straining out the gnat and swallowing a camel—what a wonderful image.

Of course, we need to be careful here, because Christians have all too often turned this conflict within first-century Judaism into an attack on Jewish people, taking upon ourselves the heavy yoke of anti-Semitism.

But Jesus tells those who would follow him that we are cut loose from the onerous demands of religion at its worst. We can set aside the burdens others have placed upon us. We can set aside the burdens that we place upon ourselves. We can take off the yoke that weighs heavily on our souls. We are set free to find our own way.

In that freedom we come closer to understanding what Jesus means when he says that in him we will find rest for our souls.

Jesus is not speaking here of rest as inactivity.

He offers the rest that is the renewal of strength after vigorous activity, the rest that restores us for further—even greater—work.

If you have done the difficult work of forgiving someone, you will need rest for your soul before you go out and do that again.

If you have been far more generous than you might ever have expected, you will need to renew your strength so that your generosity can continue to grow.

If you have fed the hungry or worked to rebuild places of devastation, well, you need rest because you will most likely be called to similar acts of compassion in the future.

This is the kind of renewal spoken of not only by Jesus but by the prophet Isaiah.

In those powerful and perhaps familiar words that we heard this morning the prophet tells us, in no uncertain terms, that we are not God. We are not the Creator, who is far greater than the creation. For thousands of years human beings have needed just such a reminder and we still benefit from hearing it today.

When the calculations comparing our smallness with God's greatness are finished, we can react to our position in the universe in several ways. We can slink away in despair. We can lash out in denial. Or we can rest in God's great, saving love. Isaiah proclaimed—and the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus confirmed—that this God who is unequalled and beyond comparison regards this creation with an equally incomparable love. God has no inconsequential creatures or untended corners of the universe. God tells us how precious we are in God's sight—which is good news—and God also tells us how precious the entire creation is.

This God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless—people like you and me.

When we wait for the Lord, we act out of a sense of who we are and who God is—not confusing the two. We recognize our limitations *and* our abilities.

When we wait for the Lord, we continue to work for peace in a world that prefers for war.

When we wait for the Lord, we continue to feed the hungry even as the number of hungry people among us seems to increase each week.

When we wait for the Lord, we continue to affirm the value of each person even as the voices of hate get louder.

When we wait for the Lord, we continue in our busy lives to love one another.

And so, when we wait for the Lord, we also need to accept the easy yoke and the rest that is offered to us.

Let me quickly suggest three ways in which we might find rest for our souls. This list is not exhaustive—and you, no doubt, could add many items to it—but these are ways that you might want to explore.

I would suggest that we *begin with pleasure*.

In our Congregational tradition, we are informed by the Reformation confession that tells us that the chief end of human beings, our ultimate purpose, is to glorify and *enjoy* God. Those things in which we take delight can be wells at which we drink when our souls are dry and thirsty.

When family life has worn you out, recall those things that you enjoy about being a parent, a spouse. Pursue them. The same is true for any relationship that might be draining you. The pleasure that you find in one area of your life can be a resource for living.

When compassion fatigue sets in, recall the joy that you have found in giving.

Here in this church as well, seek out opportunities to do what you enjoy.

What gives you pleasure? What do you need to do so that you can experience that more often?

We might also *begin to pray*. And no matter how much we pray, it always seems that we are just *beginning* to pray, doesn't it?

Prayer is intimate conversation with God—real, demanding, loving, and engaged conversation between yourself and the real, loving God.

Saying this, of course, raises many questions and concerns—far more than can be addressed this morning. So let me suggest that to start we set aside our questions and simply receive prayer and meditation is a gift. Prayer itself is a time for receiving. Being still in the presence of God, lifting your cares to God, pausing to listen as the Spirit of God speaks to your spirit are all paths to receiving the strength you need.

We don't need to overthink this. The psalmist knew the value of simply saying: "God, hear my prayer; let my cry for help come to you."

So often we regard prayer as a luxury. When the busy world pushes in on us, demanding our time, luxuries are often the first things to go. Prayer, however, is more of a necessity if we are to find rest for our souls and continue to be open to other people and, indeed, to all of life.

Our souls are renewed as well by *perspective*, the ability to see the big picture. Perspective is "the capacity to see what is really important in any given situation." It is connected to prayer because the habit of reflection is critical to acquiring a sense of perspective. And reflection is simply not possible unless some time each day is devoted to silence.

Silence allows us to reflect on the higher purpose, to question our decisions in the light of that purpose, and to seek strength not to betray it. It allows us to listen to the inner stirrings of the spirit.

Of course, perspective is also one of the gifts of this congregation. Here we find and create a civil community in an uncivil world, a place to explore our beliefs and doubts. Here we discover what it means to forgive and be forgiven; we try out loving our neighbor in the hope that we might be able to do this beyond these four walls as well.

We find rest for our souls through pleasure, prayer, and perspective. And, as I said, you know many other ways to receive the renewal of your spirit that God desires for each of us. We receive anew those things that fill us so that we can continue our lives as grateful and generous human beings.

When we start to experience the freedom of the gospel,
when we take up the light yoke and the easy burden of Jesus,
when we know rest for our souls, the renewal of our strength

We are able to find religion that gives life and sustains us.

I've long appreciated the Latin roots of our word "religion." The words suggest a binding together after being apart. Religion is what binds us together once more. We can be spiritual on our own, alone. As people who are not only spiritual but also religious, we are not left to our own devices. We are brought together for mutual support. We are brought together so that with each other we might be a sign to the world that the way of Jesus Christ is the way of life.

We have a special charge as those who follow in the way of Jesus Christ to take neither ourselves nor our religion too seriously. And that can lead to wonderful possibilities—after all, it's said that angels can fly because they take themselves so lightly. We're no angels, so let us pray that we might not impose heavy burdens on others.

Let us keep ourselves close so that we may always hear the One who speaks those gracious words, not only to us, but to all people, the One whose yoke is easy, whose burden is light.