

THE GIFT OF REST

25 At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; 26 yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 27 All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. 28 "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 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. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

(Matthew 11:25-30, NRSV)

Anyone with children can probably remember the exhaustion of those first few months: the 2 a.m. feedings, round the clock diaper changes, the months of unrelenting colic. The one saving grace is that most infants require a lot of sleep, as do the parents. Like most older babies, my son Matthew napped once in the morning and once in the afternoon, as did Colleen and I with any luck! Of course Matthew would have been happy to skip his nap, but Colleen and I lived for those magic hours. We planned our days around them. We measured time in terms of them. Instead of 11, 12, or 1 o'clock, it was 3 hours 'til naptime, 2 hours 'til naptime, or 1 hour 'til naptime. Yes, those were the days.

Rest is important, not just for parents, but for all of us. When I say rest I don't just mean getting adequate sleep, I mean finding the time on a regular basis for a change of pace, a little variety, which includes a cessation of activities. That's the whole idea behind the Sabbath. In the first creation account in Genesis, God created for six days and on the seventh day God rested. The idea translated into one of the Ten Commandments when the Israelites are urged to, "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." Keeping the Sabbath day holy meant refraining from work and taking time to worship God. I'm certainly not advocating a return to the blue laws of yesteryear, but I do think it is important for us to find our Sabbath, our time for peaceful rest and spiritual reflection every week.

In the Bible passage we heard read earlier today, Jesus promises us the gift of rest. But to get a clue of how we are to receive this gift, let's take a look at the passage as a whole. First, we must consider the source of true rest. Jesus said, "Come unto **me**." In the call to come to Christ, we make a deliberate choice to turn toward him and go in his direction.

At times in life we feel pulled in many directions all at the same time, but we can only go in one direction for true rest. If our goal is restful reflection through spiritual growth we have to go God's way. Any other direction will likely be a path of frustration or dissatisfaction. When I read the words of Jesus saying, "Come unto me," I picture him with open arms much the way we often bend down with wide open arms to encourage

children to come to us for comfort and love. In much the same fashion when I read the Parable of the Prodigal Son I picture the father anxiously awaiting his son's return, desperately praying to God for the boy's safe return. And then when that day arrives the father rubs his eyes in disbelief as the wayward child appears on the horizon. As the overjoyed father runs to meet his son, somewhere along the way those old arms must have opened wide that he might envelop his son with hugs and kisses as quickly as possible.

That's how I envision God's desire to relate to each and every one of us. It's not about condemnation for what we should have been doing. It's not about finger wagging and "I told you so's." None of that. It's about grace. It's about joy. It's about a love that has been there all our lives even when we had no clue. It's about a God who cared enough to send a personal invitation in the form of a Son to speak the words, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

We are all weary and burdened at some point. Some of us are weary from carrying the burden of perfectionism. Somehow we got it in our heads that even if life wasn't perfect, that somehow we ought to be. Perhaps we're still trying to earn a parent's approval or a spouse's love. Some of us are weary from carrying the burden of broken dreams: the relationship that ended badly, the child who's gone down a self-destructive path, the painful loss of someone we loved. Others of us are weary from the baggage of addiction: to alcohol, to food, to work. Whatever our burden, whatever it is that makes us weary, Jesus' loving invitation remains, "Come unto me and I will give you rest."

Exactly what kind of rest is Jesus talking about? Is it some sort of divine power nap that will allow us to get back into life's game ready to accomplish even more? Or is it something different altogether? Part of what we receive from spending restful reflection with God is a transformed perspective. Suddenly, a right relationship with the Creator of the universe transforms our drive for perfection into a desire to live at peace with ourselves and our past. The grace of God can help us gracefully accept those areas of our lives that never seem to quite work out the way we want them to. The strength of God's Spirit can be our Higher Power to help us face our addiction head on, one day at a time.

It is interesting that after Jesus promises rest to the weary and burdened, that he next tells his hearers to take his yoke upon them and learn from him, because he is gentle and humble in heart. His hearers had been living under oppression, religious oppression from leaders who made the simplicity of God's law into a burdensome weight impossible for any human to possibly bear. There was nothing gentle or humble in the way the Pharisees looked down their noses at those they perceived as less holy. Jesus' hearers were also living under political oppression from the Romans. They were not a free people who could choose their own leaders. They were an oppressed people who could be harassed by the occupying Roman soldiers at any time. The Roman military machine was clearly not gentle and humble in heart. But Jesus was. He gave the people relief from their religious and political burdens by helping them see what was really important, loving God and loving people, even enemies.

The image of taking Christ's yoke brought to mind two oxen yoked together to pull a plow. It's the image of **two** oxen that is so pivotal, so comforting. One is the hearer; the other is Jesus. Unlike the religious or political oppression that had been forced around the people's necks like a dog collar, the yoke of Jesus is in fact easy with only a light burden. Why? Because it is a team of two, a human-divine connection.

Yes, to be yoked we must go God's way, but the power of God's Spirit lightens much of our load. That's why Jesus said his yoke is easy, because he helps us carry it. It's also easy because it fits just right. It is not so tight it threatens to choke us. It is not so loose that it threatens to fall off. The fit is just right because when we hook on to God's way for our lives and find our life's purpose, it is among the greatest feelings in all the world.

Do you know the old Shaker hymn, "Simple Gifts?" In part it says, "'Tis the gift to be simple. 'Tis the gift to be free. 'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be. And when we find ourselves in the place just right, 'twill be the valley of love and delight." When we find our niche in life, when we find the purpose for our existence on this planet it is truly a "valley of love and delight." We all have a vocation, a calling from God regardless of our age or our ability. There is something in life that God is calling us to do; and if we trust God to lead us it will make all the difference. Maybe it's volunteering at hospice. Maybe it's adopting a child. Maybe it's bringing beauty into our world through paint, poetry, or a garden. Whatever it is, when we find it and do it we experience more joy, more satisfaction, more love and delight.

How profound to notice that at the beginning of this passage Jesus calls the weary and burdened to himself to be his partners in the yoke. Upon doing so, the weary and burdened soul finds rest instead of restlessness, and a way of life that is the way of love. For when Jesus offers us the gift of rest, it is more than just a much-needed nap. It's the gift of resting in God's peace. It's the gift of letting God lift our burdens. It's the gift of knowing we don't face them alone. May we yoke ourselves to our loving Creator. And may our souls rest in a valley of love and delight. AMEN.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, who on the seventh day of creation rested, help us to rest in you. When we find ourselves worn out by life, worn down by responsibilities, help us bring our burdens

to you, knowing how very much you care for us. For those who are weary from carrying a load of perfectionism, we ask your assistance. For those who are weary from the relationship that ended badly, the chronic illness of a loved one, or a child who has chosen the wrong path, we ask your grace. For those struggling with depression, anxiety, or any type of addiction we ask your courage and strength. Grant us time for restful reflection, which leads to your peace.

And now, O God, unto you be all glory and praise, through Jesus Christ we pray.
AMEN.