

SERMON
Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 14
July 6, 2008

Zechariah 9:9-12
Psalm 145:8-14
Romans 7:15-25a
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

The author Max Lucado tells a story about an airplane trip he had been on. Max traveled a lot due to his profession as a writer and lecturer. He used his time on the plane to get much of his work done. During this particular trip, he was in seat 14-D next to a woman in 14-E.

He said that this woman made him feel like he was sitting next to Gomer Pyle's mom. She was curious and excited about everything. Plus, she was extremely talkative. She asked about the type of plane they were flying on. She asked what river was below them. She even loudly proclaimed her pleasure when they put mayonnaise on her sandwich.

Mid-way through the flight, Max realized that she was the only one on the plane enjoying the trip. When they landed, she said to Max; "Son, you worked the entire trip; you need to relax – enjoy the journey." She was right. It does little good to make the trip and miss the journey.

Do you feel like this sometimes describes your life – you are making the trip, but missing the journey?

In our Gospel story this morning, we hear about yet another gift that Jesus gives us. Jesus says; "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Jesus offers us the gift of rest. But as with any gift, to receive its benefits, it must be used.

In his book; "Sabbath; Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives", Wayne Muller talks about gathering together for what he calls "Sabbath Retreats". Muller writes; "By the afternoon, some people inevitably fall asleep right in the middle of our meditations. When they awaken, they quickly apologize for their spiritual transgressions; they feel ashamed and embarrassed.

I reassure them that it is good when they sleep. It is a sign of trust, that they feel safe enough finally to let go and surrender their weariness." Perhaps that happens to some of you in worship on Sunday mornings? In fact, it does happen, because I can see it.

I think about how it was when our children were little and they would fall asleep on my lap. I don't know if it was more peaceful and restful for them or for me. Either way, being at rest is an issue of trust. A child is able to fall asleep on a parents lap because of a total sense of trust.

Just before Jesus offers this gift of rest, He prays; "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." Time and time again Jesus lifts up the faith and the trust of infants and young children.

But it seems that, as we become adults, we lose that sense of dependence – that feeling of trust. Perhaps it is because we are not remembering the gift that Jesus gives us in rest.

Muller goes on to tell about a woman named Jacqueline who comes to a retreat directly from work. “She has an important position in the state legislature. As an aide to a legislative leader, she is always at the center of great frantic activity.

She writes bills, lobbies legislators, meets with constituents, soothes egos, puts out fires, and quells the inevitable flaring angers and frustrations that saturate the legislative activities. She is skillful and kind, and respected by her peers.

Still, when she is finally able to leave work, often at a late hour, she tends to her three children with a mixture of weariness, need, and guilt. When she arrives at our retreat, she feels drained and depleted.

‘I am so tired,’ she says. ‘I am with people all day and night, but I still feel so lonely. My soul feels dry. Even when things work well, when I can break away from work and spend some time with my kids, nothing seems to heal this fatigue, this sense of guilt and duty and responsibility. It all feels so heavy.’ Jacqueline sits back and quietly weeps.”

When Moses becomes weary, leading his people through their trials in the desert, God says to him; “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” And as we have been hearing, Jesus says to his followers; “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” For Moses, as for Jesus, rest is a precious ointment, a balm for the heavy heart.

When you think about it, for Jesus, anything was possible. However, Jesus did not offer “seven secret coping strategies” to get work done faster, or “nine spiritual stress management techniques” to enhance our effectiveness.

Instead, he offered the simple gift of rest. “Learn from me,” he invited, “and you will find rest for your souls.” And if we are really honest with ourselves, isn’t that what we truly seek – rest for our weary souls? But we are so tempted to fall for what our world defines as rest.

Personally, I like looking through travel magazines. They show exotic places all over the world. The last one I looked at described the top 10 beaches in the world. Now even if you don’t read these magazines, you certainly get catalogues or brochures in the mail trying to sell you tropical vacations.

We see pictures with beautiful people in natural cotton clothing sitting under umbrellas with drinks in their hands, and we think, “If only I could be at that place, or if only I had an umbrella (or a drink with an umbrella!), then I could be at rest like those people.”

Watch some of the television commercials. For instance, watch the commercials for Corona Beer. They show two beautiful people lounging on a perfect white sand beach with clear blue water. There is no one else around. On the table between them is two bottles of Corona Beer with lime wedges stuck in the top.

The message is that if you drink Corona Beer, all of your troubles will melt away. You will be at rest. Life will become like paradise.

So perhaps we save up and book the vacation. But the stresses of traveling and scheduling and worrying about things back at home give us anything but rest.

Or if we can’t afford the vacation, perhaps we just order something from the catalog thinking this will do the trick. Then we go to work to pay for it all, when it is really the rest that we seek.

Ironically, this rest we desire is freely given and close at hand, but we are convinced that it is far off and all but impossible to obtain.

You see, when Jesus promised rest, he was speaking of more than a nap on the couch (though this may be helpful). He was speaking of more than a vacation sitting on the beach.

Jesus invites us to the rest of a trusting relationship. A relationship that experiences the ease of being loved and accepted, and the refreshment of a meaningful life that is enough. Jesus says, "I will give you rest." Leave the credit card in the drawer. Because this kind of rest you cannot buy. It is God's free gift to be received and enjoyed.

But as good as this gift is, we want to turn it into a form of legalism. We make up rules and restrictions on how we must rest. We turn it into one more thing that we have to add to our already busy lives.

The Jews took the command to rest so seriously that they came up with 39 specific acts that could not be done on the Sabbath. Tasks such as sowing, plowing, reaping, threshing, and winnowing were prohibited. So was grinding, sifting, kneading, and baking.

Spinning, weaving, hunting and slaughtering, building, hammering, and transporting were among the prohibitions. Over time, Sabbath laws became overly legalistic.

For instance if you were walking through a strawberry patch on the Sabbath and decided to pick one to enjoy, you would be breaking the Sabbath and therefore breaking God's commandment. The Jewish Sabbath could be so restrictive and complicated that a person was a nervous wreck all day long. It was no longer a day of rest.

And this is the situation that Jesus is speaking to. "Separate yourselves from the restrictions of the Law and yoke yourself with me. For I will give you true rest. Follow me. Where I go, you will go. I will be the stronger one. I will lead, and soon we shall be like one."

A young Husky was tied onto a dog sled team. The young dog decided to jump up by himself. He tugged and pulled alone on the harness until he was exhausted. He sat down just as the rest of the team started to run. They ran right over him.

When he finally got back on his feet, he thought he could outrun the old lead sled dog. But all he achieved was getting choked on his collar. Then he saw a short cut, so he veered to the right. The harness snapped him back.

By now the young Husky was hating life. He was tired, hurt and bruised. The old sled dog said to him, "Come and learn how I do it."

Sometimes, we think that we know what is best. Sometimes, we have to learn the hard way. We risk our health. We risk relationships falling apart. We risk growing old living with guilt and regrets. We risk taking the trip but missing the journey.

I find it ironic that today we are talking about being dependent, yoked and bound, and how that will give us peace and rest. Yet, a couple of days ago we celebrated "Independence Day". We heard words like "independent, freedom and liberty." Yes, we Americans like our independence.

We don't like anyone controlling us or telling us what to do. We don't like to be dependent on anything or anyone. We believe that if we can accomplish this, our lives will be fulfilling. But as Dr. Phil would say; "How's that working for us?"

Certainly, we give thanks for the freedoms that we enjoy living in America. Many people around the world do not have such freedoms. And over the years thousands if not millions have given their lives for the sake of the freedoms we have.

But these freedoms have nothing to do with our relationship to Christ. For our true freedom, our true peace, our true rest comes through being yoked together with Jesus. And that is something that can never be taken away from us.

However, if we do not receive the gift of rest that comes through being joined with Christ, we will work too hard and forget our tender mercies.

We will forget those we love, forget our children and our natural wonder. We will forget that which will give us true meaning.

It took a very long time for Jack to recover from the chemotherapy treatments for the tumor that threatened his brain. After the treatments were finally over, he would begin each morning with a Sabbath meal, a sacred, quiet time to begin the day fresh and new.

He would squeeze fresh orange juice, and place it beside his meal on the breakfast table. Then he would wait. And while waiting, he would pray. He would reflect on the promise of the day, and wait – until the sun rose above a particular tree outside his window.

Then the light from the sun would strike the orange juice, at which point, he said, it would “diffuse into orange, crystal light.” Then he would drink from the glass, and begin the meal that began his day.

“A waste of time” we might say. Jesus might say; “understanding and receiving the gift of 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.” Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.