

Sara Anne Berger, First Presbyterian Church, Natchitoches, 6.21.20,
Matthew 11:28-30; Psalm 23:3

Sermon Resources:

<http://www.rickmorley.com/archives/1574>

https://www.progressiveinvolvement.com/progressive_involvement/2011/06/lectionary-blogging-matthew-11-16-19-25-30.html

We are on the 3rd of my sermons covering things I want to make sure I've told you before I leave. So, I've told you that God loves you. I've told you that God cares about you. Today, we come to Jesus' comforting words from Matthew, spoken to the weary and heavy-laden, and offering rest. And those words bring me to what I want you to know, today. Here's what I want you to know: You are allowed to rest. You, all of you, each one of you, you are allowed to rest.

And the reason I want you to know this is because I think a lot of us conceptualize rest as something extra. Something we need to feel guilty about. Something we're trying to get away with. So, what I want you to know is not just about rest, what I want you to know is that you are allowed to rest. Not in a sneaky way, or a guilty way, or as an extra element of your life. You are allowed to rest.

That's the part, the allowing, where we are countering some other narratives about rest. We're countering the idea that you don't need it, you don't need to rest. Sometimes people are choosing to rest, but they don't think of themselves as needing it. I don't need to rest, I can keep going and going, I'm not weak—and if they are resting, it's just cause

they chose to, but they don't need it. But see, you are allowed to rest, because you do need it. You are not a robot, you are not a machine, and just because you can keep going and going relentlessly doesn't mean you should. It's not weaker than someone else and it's not just a nice thing to decide to do, you need to rest. And you are allowed to.

We're also countering the idea that you have to deserve rest, you have to have earned it. You can rest, sure, once you've racked up enough hours or points or privileges. You can rest, once you've utterly exhausted yourself. You can rest, once you get truly tired, but not before. You can rest once you have proven or been deemed worthy of rest. No. This rest Jesus offers is not deserved, he doesn't say anything about earning or proving. He does mention exhaustion, but see what he wants to do is address that, he clearly doesn't think that's how you should be living. You don't just rest because you earned it, because you deserved it, because you finally wore yourself out and are worthy of it. You are simply allowed to rest.

And finally, this is a relatively new one, but there's this cultural concept of self-care, and we don't have time to get into how it's been twisted by people of privilege, and taken far from its true roots. There are good versions of self-care, but there's also a version that advocates rest, but as a way that you can keep hustling otherwise. You rest, you engage in that kind of self-care, so that you'll go back to being productive. It's rest with a purpose, that you rest in order to get something out of it, to achieve, to facilitate production and activity and

earning. And, listen, that may be where you are, and where you need to start, and it's not the worst place, then. If you finally realize hey, I am not a machine, and I shouldn't keep hitting complete exhaustion and I need some self-care—if that's why you rest, well, okay, you're on your way. But, Jesus doesn't offer rest so that you will be productive, so that you will produce. He doesn't offer rest, so that you'll be able to get up and back to the grind and hustle more effectively. He offers rest because he sees people weary and heavy-laden, he offers rest because his yoke is easy and his burden is light. Rest may result in a self that is cared for, in a self who is more productive or active or earning, but that's not the purpose of resting, with Jesus. You are allowed to rest, because Jesus says you can.

You are allowed to rest, not because you are deserving, not because you finally hit the collapsing point, not because it's gonna make you better in the long-run, you are allowed to rest, because Jesus says you are allowed to rest.

But rest in what way? Take a week off and pull the covers over our heads and sleep until we have to get back at it? Probably not. And realistically, we aren't going to be able to completely turn our backs on those parts of our lives that leave us worried and heavy-laden, we can't turn away completely from the people and problems that need our care.

What Jesus says, though, is you will find rest for you souls. Which echoes another famous passage, Psalm 23:3, which says, God restores my soul and leads me in right paths for his name's sake. But see, the

word for soul, psyche in Greek, and nephesh in Hebrew, they don't quite translate for us now. When we hear soul, usually we think of one little spiritual part of us, like something shiny and holy, that's separate from everything else. It does mean something holy, but it also means: all of you, your whole life, your breath, your heart, your mind, your being, your life. God restores my life, you will find rest for your life. Your whole life, your very being, will be refreshed, restored, rested. You are allowed to rest with your whole being, your whole self, your whole life.

That is, Jesus isn't trying to help you achieve a work-life balance. I mean, I don't think he's opposed to you doing that, I'm just saying this isn't Jesus saying okay well you should get 3 hours rest for every 9 hours worked, or something. He's doing something more fundamentally altering than that. He wants you to take his gentle and light yoke upon you, that will bind you to his way and his purposes, and he wants to give rest to your soul, your whole life. He wants the rest not to be extra or earned or for some greater purpose. For Jesus, for his way of living, the rest is baked right in. The rest is a fundamental, integral part of life in Jesus Christ. If you're going to follow him, live in him, live like him, then the rest is baked right in. So, if you're not resting, ever, if you're waiting until you've earned it or are exhausted enough, if you've decided you don't need it, or can't possibly manage it, if you're waiting on someone else to give you permission, or stop making you feel guilty, if for any of those reasons, you aren't taking the rest you are allowed to take, then you are missing a key component of life in Jesus Christ. You

have missed part of what it means to be a disciple. Because for Jesus, the rest is not an addition to your life, it's an integral part of your life. It's rest for your life, restoration for your soul. So, you are allowed to rest.

What this means, practically, is you should be resting regularly. In fact, I think part of the reason we envision it as abandoning our responsibilities, sleeping for a whole week, disappearing onto a Caribbean island without a care in the world, and why we think, therefore, that we can't rest regularly, because every day life would not permit such things, I think the reason we think of resting as this decadent, extra, or a guilty thing, is because we're not doing it regularly. It's not built into the fundamental structure of our lives. We keep trying to wedge it in later, after everything else, we keep waiting on someone else to give us the okay, or for a time it won't be inconvenient or problematic at all. And that just doesn't work. Because it's supposed to be one of the building blocks of who we are as Christians, a fundamental pillar of our whole way of living. We are allowed to rest, and if we are going to rest in the way Jesus describes, it needs to be happening regularly. Like, before we need it, before we've earned it, before we've collapsed from exhaustion. Before anyone has given us permission or lifted the guilt or taken our troubles away. Rest, regularly, and now. Because you have a whole life of following Jesus ahead, a whole life of living this way, and Jesus didn't say live that life worn out and burdened and exhausted, he said if you're going to take on my yoke, and live my way, then you'll need rest. You've got to rest. You're allowed to rest.

And you may be thinking of Sabbath, and you all know that's an important thing to me, I've preached on it before. It struck me, though, in my personal study of Sabbath, how often it is used in scripture to calibrate time, and also how often the commands for the sabbath tell you to prepare and plan for it. That the way of marking time in scripture often begins with rest and goes from there, and that when you are planning and preparing, you are thinking ahead to your rest, anticipating it. But I don't only mean sabbath, and that's not exactly what Jesus is describing. He's talking about a way of life, that includes rest for your souls, restoration of your life. For that to happen regularly, though, I think we'll have to plan for our resting, and put it in first. Not as an extra or an addition or a reward, but as a fundamental part of living as disciples.

Now, here's the part where I'm supposed to say, "when you do this, it will show everyone the blessing and joy of a life in Jesus Christ" and that people will be on-board and applaud you. And I'm going to be honest with you, probably not. Writer Shauna Niequist talks about this when she says that people who don't feel free to do this, or won't do this in their lives, will resent you doing it in yours. That probably is going to happen. It also will always inconvenience someone in some way. Because you are weary and heavy-laden, and those burdens don't magically disappear. So there will not be a perfect, finished, approved, totally convenient time for you to rest. It's going to be hard to do in a world that absolutely does not want us to do this in a regular, life-

restoring way. Frankly, you will have to be tough and brave enough to rest. It will be inconvenient, and people may resent you, or not approve, or not understand why you are resting when you don't seem that exhausted. But you know what, you are allowed to rest, because Jesus says you are allowed. You rest anyway, because it is an integral part of Jesus' way, and if you don't you're missing out of part of a life of discipleship. You rest anyway, because you are allowed.

And once you have, when you are back at your work and productivity, when you are back to the cares and concerning parts of life, part of your work is to make it so that other people can rest. To fight for changes in laws and systems and attitudes, that keep other people from being able to rest, from being able to make that choice. You don't rest in a way that you heap all the burdens on someone else, permanently. No, you rest and you work and you live in such a way that you bring that rest into everyone's life. Because you have discovered how good this way of Jesus is, how light and easy this yoke is, and you want everyone to know that they are allowed to rest.

So, you are allowed to rest, but this world is not made for us to do that. So you're going to have to do the work to rest. And you'll have to do the work to allow other people to rest. But you don't have to do it exhausted, weary, heavy-laden and burdened, because Jesus says you are allowed to rest, a life of regular rest.

Come to him, you who are weary and carrying heavy-burdens, and let him give you rest. Take his yoke upon you, and learn from him, and

begin living in a way that is easy and light. Come to him, and have your life re-made, for he has rest for your soul, your very being, your whole life. Come to him, whose yoke is light, and hear that you are allowed to rest, that he will give you rest and restoration for your soul. Amen.