

San Lorenzo Community Church, United Church of Christ
Sermon: A Weary Bloom
Preached by Rev. Annette J. Cook
Sunday, July 9, 2017

A reading from the Gospel of Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

¹⁶ “To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:

¹⁷ “‘We played the pipe for you,
and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge,
and you did not mourn.’

¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ ¹⁹ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ But wisdom is proved right by her deeds.”

²⁵ At that time Jesus said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. ²⁶ Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.

²⁷ “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

²⁸ “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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.”

This ends the reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Thanks be to God.

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No matter what you do, it will cause trouble. This is the law of “damned if you do, damned if you don’t.”

If I use this money to pay the rent, I won't have enough left over for food. But if I don't use the money to pay the rent, my landlord will evict me. If I invite Jane to the party, she'll get drunk and make an unpleasant scene. But if I don't invite her, she'll never forgive me. If the school bans junk food in the cafeteria, the kids will say their rights are being infringed upon, and if they don't ban it, others will say they're damaging the kids' health. If I give the homeless person \$5, I will be called a fool and an easy mark; but if I don't give the homeless person something, I will be called a greedy miser.

This is the set-up for the scripture today. It seems that Jesus and the disciples are standing around and talking about this Catch-22 that no matter what you do, it will cause trouble.

Jesus repeats to the group that the powers that be, the elders in the community, first condemned John the Baptist for being an ascetic. They called him a "demon," a "wild man," a "recluse who wants us all to live like animals in the wilderness without food or drink." And then the elders condemned Jesus. After all, Jesus was at the other end of the spectrum from John. Jesus was eating and drinking and living in society yet they attacked him by calling him a "glutton and a wino," and saying he was guilty by association based on the company he kept.

You have seen this kind of reaction before. It is a typical approach used by powers-that-be to manipulate public opinion. Attack them personally. Assault their character. Drag their name through the mud. Accuse them of insufficient piety--"he's a demon"--or some variation of hedonism--"he's a glutton and wino." *Ad hominem* attacks are nothing new, it seems. If you can't engage your opponents' arguments, then attack them personally. It's the oldest trick in the book.

To which Jesus responds: ²⁸ "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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."

Before I found the United Church of Christ, I would sometimes attend the Berkeley Friends Meeting where worship is a process of sitting in silence for an hour and, as the Spirit moves, one or more people within the congregation may offer words to share. But mostly it is the practice of sitting, in silence, with others.

One Sunday morning, the windows were open to let in the fresh springtime air. Children were playing outside and could hear a child in the distance saying over and over, "Let it go, let it go." I wondered if the children were tugging on a rope or a ball or some toy, but I heard the child's words as a direct message to me. "Let it go." As in "Annette, you need to let it go. You're holding it too tightly. You can't hold everything inside. Let it go."

Then, as I listened, it dawned on me that the child was actually singing, playfully, graciously running and singing "Let it go, let it go." Not words of a fight or struggle, but words of joy and rest. And, in that moment, my heart found release.

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See, as many of you know, I have only two speeds: go and stop. But when I stop it's not like I'm resting, I'm just collapsing because I can't go anymore. And I don't think that's what sacred rest means. I think that maybe we've made an idol of multi-tasking and hyper-activity. Which is maybe why, I, like many of you, feel like I spend so much of my life exhausted.

I'm not talking the exhaustion and lack of rest that is unavoidable in a life of economic poverty – where every ounce of time and energy goes into basic survival. I'm talking about the ways in which despite the fact that we have every time saving device known to humanity that we don't actually have more time.

In 1965 there was a senate sub-committee that formed to respond to the vast developments in technology that were increasing productivity. They were concerned that, given the increase in productivity within 20 years, surely there would be a 15-20 hour work week and then what in the world would the US workforce do when so bored? That's right, the US Senate in 1965 thought by now that we would have more free time than we'd all know what to do with. (But they also probably thought we'd all have jet-packs too.) But it's not worked out like that, has it?

We have every convenience at our fingertips and yet we're exhausted. Busyness is an American epidemic. Like children afraid of the dark who sleep with the lights on we are perhaps terrified of what might reach out and grab us, what might make itself known in the unfilled space. So we layer on two or three things to fill every moment to make sure there isn't any.

And even when we have so-called leisure time, we seem to have an endless stream of background noise – Facebook HuffPost Buzz-Feed Instagram podcasts Netflix over 300 cable channels and then back to Facebook to see if anything has happened in the five minutes since we last checked Facebook.

So this started out being a sermon about how you should “take more breaks,” but somehow an exhortation to get more rest, and take Sabbath more seriously, and take care of yourself ends up not sounding like good news to me (as lovely as those things are) because it just feels like one more thing I have to add to my to-do list. Right? Yes, today I must walk the dogs, lose weight, go to work, read that book on my nightstand, finish the client taxes, write a sermon and, oh yes, take Sabbath rest more seriously.

It seems to me we are weighed down enough by to-do lists that adding “rest more” to them just doesn't feel freeing or healing to me, it only makes me want to go back to bed, and not in the keeping Sabbath way but in the mildly-depressed-I-can't-deal-with-anything-or-anyone way and that's not rest, that's an anxiety disorder. Which isn't actually restful at all.

Not to mention that when we add “get more rest and take Sabbath seriously” to our to-do list, we might be tempted to think of it as nothing more than a scheme to fuel us back up just so we can do more work; after all the world really needs us.

But the wise Rabbi Abraham Heschel reminds us that Sabbath rest is actually about stopping long enough to see that God's redeeming work in the world goes on with or without us.

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I think Jesus told his disciples to Come away with him and rest and eat – not as a pit stop to fill them up to get them back out there as quick as possible – but so that they might experience *themselves* as just as hungry, broken and tired as those he sent them to serve. And to see that, while they are resting, Jesus is continuing to teach and to heal; just as Jesus continues to teach and to heal the whole world, with or without our help.

For the truth is that we are all hungry, broken and tired. We are all vulnerable because we are all human. This is the church of vulnerability. And that's good news because here in this church, we are vulnerable together.

That's why the yoke is easy, because we are doing this together. That's why the burden is light, because no one is alone. We are all blooming in the same garden; our roots are woven together and they strengthen and support one another. We encourage each other to grow and shine. We weep with one another's sorrows and we applaud and give thanks for one another's joy.

Sacred rest is not something we "deserve," as in: "*She deserves to be happy.*" "*I deserve a nice vacation.*" "*You deserve a break today.*" This is not about deserving. If we see rest as something that we deserve, then we just get trapped into trying to become worthy of deserving it. Jesus is talking about a sacred rest that comes not how hard you have been working. It does not come from our "deservingness." It comes from God. I'm pretty sure it doesn't work like employee benefits do where you earn a certain number of Sabbath days for every hour you work. This is the opposite of deserving. You cannot earn this sacred rest because this kind of rest is pure grace, the grace of God.

This sacred rest is a break from the Catch22 of society that judges us no matter what we do or what we say. This sacred rest turns down the volume of the political hate speech and the mean and provocative Twitter feed. This sacred rest is for you and for me. We get to set aside the self-obsessed culture. We take a break from the am-I-productive-enough, lovable enough, safe enough, thin enough, rich enough, strong enough system we live under.

The sacred rest that is yours and mine comes from the promise of the Gospel: that Jesus came to reconcile us to God; that Jesus came to heal and love and save the sin-sick and the over-functioning; that Jesus came to give rest to the weary, and the restless, to give rest to overworked social workers and the volunteer-stretched retirees and mildly depressed executives.

So, today, rest. Rest knowing that you are enough. You are already a beautiful bloom and you are already connected and yoked together. Rest in the knowledge of how madly God loves you. Not because of who you are, but because of who God is. Rest in that. Not because you should. But because you can.

Hear this amazing paraphrase of the Gospel text from Matthew 11:

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly." Amen