

July 9, 2017 • Youth Service Project Commissioning

## “Why We All Need a Little Rest”

Sermon by the Rev. Robert English



*Matthew 11:16-19; 25-30*

*“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”*

*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; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 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. “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 am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”*

One of the joys of my job as pastor is that I talk with a lot of people, like all the time and all different types of people. And because of my vocation, people tend to be a little more open about where they are at and what they are going through. It is a sacred blessing, an honor and a privilege to connect with people and to listen to the story of their lives as it unfolds: their joys, their struggles, their dreams and their failures.

Over the past 9 years of doing ministry here in this place and with this community there have been a few themes that have emerged from these conversations over time, and one of these themes is that people feel really, really tired, exhausted in fact, they feel like they are constantly moving from one thing to another, to another, an endless string of calendar appointments and reminders. Folks will say that they’ve never been busier than they are right now at this very moment, with all the differing priorities and conflicts and choices that they have to make and expectations or obligations they feel they need to meet.

Now first I want to say: I feel you. I really, really do. It seems that the longer I live in this place and on this planet the more and more scarce time seems to be. Now you might be thinking well of course you feel this way Robert, you have two small children and most of the people you connect with are other parents with small children. And when you have small children, time is always in short demand. And of that is true. I talk with a lot of our families and preschool families, and when they explain to me their daily or weekly schedules I get exhausted just listening to it. But, one of the joys of our congregation is that we truly are intergenerational and therefore I connect with lots of different types of folks, and I tell you this sense of exhaustion really transcends life-stages.

Our youth, our children, our parents, folks in the midst of their golden earning years, even you folks who are retired, you’ve told me that you’ve never been busier than you are now, in your retirement.

Being busy, keeping busy, doing, moving, producing, these are all things that are deeply engrained in our society and a part of what it means to be a human being in a cultural context. I don’t necessarily think that there is anything wrong with doing, producing, moving, having a calendar or experiencing the fullness of this creation and this life.

But, as with all things in this world that are good for us, there is a shadow side to this hyper-productivity and culture of busyness that’s worth exploring. Because we hear time and time again throughout all scripture, in fact it is commanded of us, that we need to slow down and rest a little bit. And we hear it reiterated in these words of Jesus today, “come to me all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me because I’m gentle and humble at heart and you will find rest for your souls.”

See this text speaks out as a gentle, pastoral and yet prophetic word to us and our culture today, because far too often we are just busy for busy sake, far too often we fill up our lives with things which in the end may not actually matter, sometimes we moving around with this frantic pace not from a sense of connectedness or groundedness in God’s unbounded love, but with a sense of desperation and fear, like if we don’t do this thing then our life won’t be as complete as it should be, or as other people’s lives appear to be.

In other words sometimes we make an idol out of our busyness and we wear it around like a badge of honor to prove to others that our lives are full and rich and meaningful, even if we feel overwhelmed, exhausted, depleted and at time maybe even a little aimless.

Now I don’t want you to think that Jesus is saying that we aren’t called to do lots of different things, or that he called us to lives of ease and comfort, like a permanent vacation on a beach in Mexico. That’s not the case at all. Jesus calls us to lives that are challenging and difficult, lives of selfless service and humble sacrificial love. And even here in this text amidst these words which sound like really good news to all who feel weary and worn, Jesus says take my yoke upon you. My yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Living in an urban place like Santa Monica some of the pastoral and agricultural imagery is lost on us, so you may not know that a yoke is the wooden piece used to bind and guide two animals when you’re plowing a field. The image is used here and throughout the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament to symbolize a life of servanthood and obedience. We in the church have continued to use this imagery and symbolism to this day as pastors of our church wear a stole around our necks as a visual reminder for all of us of our call to take on the yoke of Jesus. To let go of our own will, desire and agenda for our lives and our world and to remember that we are called to learn from Jesus, to follow in his way, to love and serve as he loves and serves.

Now you might be thinking to yourself it just sounds like one more thing to add to your to-do list or you may be thinking that Jesus is being a little bit ironic offering us rest for our souls while at the same time calling us to lives of sacrificial service. It does seem to be a little confusing and even a little bit contradictory.

But here's the truth that Jesus is calling us to, he's not calling us to add one more thing to our to-do list, he's calling us to see our to-do list through the lens of our discipleship. He's calling us to examine why we are doing what we are doing, not just adding more stuff for us to do.

His invitation is more radical and more challenging, more life-giving and a chance for us to let go of this narrative of busyness for busyness sake, or busyness because we're afraid of missing out, or busyness in order to make my life more whole. Jesus is saying don't just do for the sake of doing, do for a higher purpose and calling, offer your energy, your life and your service to God and you will know salvation, healing and new life.

He says learn from me, follow me, pattern your life in my way and you will find rest for your souls.

One of the things that we would all benefit from is from patterning our life in the way of Jesus. I don't just mean wearing a bracelet that says "WWJD" (what would Jesus do) and look down at it while you're stuck in traffic fuming at the person in front of you who doesn't know how to drive. I mean actually doing daily, weekly or monthly what Jesus did. We sometimes miss these things because they are contained in what I like to call 'throwaway verses' in the text I used to think are mostly used to more the narrative along. But we see time and time again that Jesus retreated to quiet places for prayer, he left the crowds and dismissed them to find rest, we see that even in the midst of a storm on the Sea of Galilee Jesus was taking a nap. He found time to replenish himself, to cultivate a living relationship with God, to ground himself in a larger more sweeping story of salvation and redemption for the world, to cultivate a humility and a life of prayer that kept him centered in those things that really matter, those things he was called to do, those things which ushered forth a new way of being human in this world.

Jesus calls us to serve and to rest, to find holy rest, sacred rest by practicing a spiritual discipline called Sabbath. Setting aside time each week to refrain from work. Sabbath is a difficult thing to practice but it is fundamental to our spiritual wellbeing. Sabbath is not just about taking it easy for a little bit, which in this relentless win at all costs world, is a blessing in and of itself. Sabbath also has the added spiritual bonus of allowing ourselves to cultivate lives of humility. Sabbath, holy rest, allows us to remember that the world will keep turning without our help.

Eugene Peterson, translator of the Message bible and pastoral theologian once said, "If you don't take Sabbath, something is wrong. You're doing too much, you're being in charge too much. You've got to quit, one day a week and just watch what God is doing when you're not doing anything."

Learn from me because I'm gentle and humble at heart. Sabbath helps us to cultivate lives of humility and gentleness.

I want to end by talking about this claim Jesus makes of his yoke being easy and his burden light. And here's what I've found in my life of discipleship, serving others rooted in God's grace and unconditional love fills us up as we pour ourselves out. It renews and reinvigorates our souls while it may deplete our bodies. It gives us glimpses and glances into the fullness of life that God intends for us and for all creation, this thing we call the kingdom of God, which lifts our spirits and gives us a hope against and above and beyond all other hope. It's a burden but it's a light, it's a yoke but it's easy to carry, it draws us back to our calm and quiet center and reminds us why we are here. It reminds us of our purpose and our meaning and it releases us from the frantic and empty busy work we create for ourselves or that the world creates for us.

To put it another way, commentator Lance Pape writes: "What Jesus offers is not freedom from work, but freedom from onerous labor.... work to which we are ill suited, work extracted under compulsion or motivated by fear, or work performed in the face of futility. The easy yoke means having something to do, a purpose that demands all and summons forth your best, work motivated by a passionate desire to see God's kingdom further realized."

I like to think of this kind of work as the work I've been fortunate to participate in while on our Youth Service Project trips over the years. It's the type of work where a group of teenagers respond to a greater love than one they themselves can offer and give up a week of their summer to go and repair a home for someone. It's the type of work that drains your physical energy, that causes you to wake up sore and stiff, the type of work where sweat drips down your nose as your holding dry wall in place on a ceiling while a group of youth are quickly and diligently screwing in the dry wall screws, it's the type of work where your muscles burn and your body aches but you feel more energized and alive as the week goes on. It's the type of work where you see young people find new life and a new purpose a new strength and a new calling. It's the type of work where you see the world transformed in front of your eyes and you say I can't wait to do that again. It's the yoke of Christ, a yoke that's easy and a burden that's light. I pray that we can all find rest for our souls and find the yoke of Christ you are called to bear. Amen.