

Sabbath Resting

Matthew 11:28-30

Sermon by Stephanie Wieand

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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.

Jesus says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

Who among us is not weary these days and in need of rest? A word that comes to mind for me, and I’ve heard others say the same, is EXHAUSTED. We, collectively, are exhausted. We are tired of this pandemic that keeps rolling over us in waves. We are tired of our grief and loss. We are tired of the injustices that continue to fill our news headlines. We are tired of feeling powerless. I feel the collective exhaustion around and within me, at Berkey, at the seminary, and beyond.

There is also exhaustion that is specific to us as individuals. Healthcare workers, teachers, and many others have carried an especially heavy burden these last two years. Our losses vary in size and shape as do the challenges we each face individually.

Pauline Boss is a therapist and researcher who has spent much of her career studying what she calls “Ambiguous Loss.” In ambiguous loss we may not be able to reach closure or understanding around our loss. We can’t necessarily name exactly what we have lost or when. It is ambiguous, but it is real. And we are likely all experiencing it to some degree during this pandemic.

Jesus says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

I think we have an interesting relationship with rest. I recently had the opportunity to hear some other peoples’ thoughts on rest, and I want to share a few with you. These are quotes.

I find it difficult to rest until my mind has deemed my list “done enough.”

I'd like to feel less guilty when I rest.

The idea of rest and sabbath scare me.

When I do get a chance to relax I often find myself scrolling my phone on YouTube trying you be entertained and it is not all that restful.

I've continued [my childhood] sabbath practice as a young adult, trying to set aside Sundays for a break from work and screens.

Resting my mind is the harder thing to do.

I want to be able to rest and not worry so much about everything that is going on in my world.

Middle of the night sleep has suddenly become elusive.

And finally, my personal favorite:

The idea of a vacation where everyone sleeps in, quietly reads a book, leisurely does yoga, sits around silently sunbathing or reading, makes me want to cry.

This is my favorite because that vacation sounds great to me!

We have a varied relationship with rest. We know it is good for us. We might even feel some "shoulds" about it. But we also sometimes feel guilty when we rest, or that there is simply too much to do.

Jesus' invitation to rest, and the commandment to take a whole day of Sabbath every week, is striking. We are invited, no- commanded, to rest!

In Exodus 20 the Sabbath commandment refers back to the creation story in which even **God** rested! Walter Brueggemann has a wonderful book on Sabbath called Sabbath as Resistance. In it he writes this about God's rest:

God rested on the seventh day. God did not show up to do more.
God absented God's self from the office. God did not come and check on creation in anxiety to be sure it was all working. God

exhibits no anxiety about the life-giving capacity of creation. All will be well, and all manner of things will be well!¹

Notice Brueggemann's emphasis on releasing anxiety and trusting that all will be well. This is hard to do. And sometimes we cannot do it. I know the anxiety of trying to get it all done, and for me the temptation is to overwork because I want to get it done in a certain way. To meet a certain standard. We also know the anxiety that accompanies this time of COVID, with the constant unknowns, decisions we have to make without enough information, and changes and unpredictability that keep coming.

Father Thomas Keating is a Trappist monk, author, and leader in the contemplative prayer movement. In his work on the spiritual journey, he has found that we humans are driven by three main needs: We have a need for...

- Power/control
- Esteem/affection
- Security/survival

Another way to put it would be that we mistakenly believe one or all of these three messages, which relate to these needs:

- I am what I do
- I am what others say or think about me
- I am what I have

When we live out of these narratives, our very worthiness becomes linked to these false beliefs. We fall into the hustle of seeking control, affection, and security. And this becomes a very heavy burden.

We serve a God who created us and called us good. Making time for rest, for Sabbath, is an act of embracing our belovedness and of claiming that we are enough, we have enough, and there is enough.

The second reason for keeping the Sabbath, as Richard outlined last week, was that God liberated God's people from slavery in Egypt. God liberates us from a life of hustling for our worthiness. God is not like Pharaoh always demanding more. In fact, it turns out that the work of creating, liberating, and sustaining are God's work! Not ours! And in knowing that, we can rest. In our Sabbath rest we remember who we are and who God is.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*, First edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 29.

One of the things that I think we have lost over COVID is the illusion that we have control and security in our lives. But ultimately we really don't. I think a lot of people have always known this better than I have- people who have lived under systems of oppression, people who are hungry, or escaping war and persecution, people whose skin color makes it dangerous to go out for a jog. The Israelites knew this after a lifetime in slavery. And it was while they were wandering in the wilderness that they learned *again* to trust in **God**. And it was *also* then, in the wilderness, that God commanded them to remember the Sabbath day and rest.

So to rest, to find moments of peace in the midst of all this, is to put our TRUST in God.

Resting is a radical act of RESISTANCE to the Pharaoh's of our day. It is an act of TRUSTING in God. And Sabbath rest is a REORIENTATION of our days and our weeks toward God as the center. And this influences everything we do.

Last semester was a very busy semester for me, and right in the middle of it, I took a retreat day at Pathways, a kind of Sabbath really. I arrived at the cottage as I usually do: boots ready for walking the grounds and labyrinth, my journal and a few books packed. The week before going I looked forward to it, and I also felt guilty for leaving my family behind on a Saturday. But as soon as I arrived I knew I was right where I needed to be. I could feel my body and soul relaxing into this gift of *time*. I napped, walked, and prayed. I basked in the warmth of the little potbelly stove.

The depth of rest and rejuvenation was palpable. I came back to my family and my work significantly refreshed. And I carried that feeling of peace into the busy and stressful week that followed. Marva Dawn talks about how we look forward to Sabbath as the pinnacle of our week and then we continue to enjoy it afterwards.² It has the potential to impact all the other days of the week. Maybe even our productivity, but certainly our peace and our presence.

Matthew 11:28

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

² Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1989).

Right at the beginning, Jesus says, “Come to me”. Our job is to show up. To **consent** to God’s work in our lives, to God’s rest. To open ourselves to God’s healing presence within. I think God probably commanded Sabbath rest because God knows the power of our **habit** of showing up. God is always inviting. When are we showing up?

This verse continues in an interesting way:

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. (Matthew 11: 29-30)

What an interesting juxtaposition of words. We hear much about rest, which is usually what we emphasize in this passage. but there is also mention of a yoke!

You may remember that a yoke was a wooden bar that was used to tie two farm animals together in order to carry a heavy load. It was also used to train less experienced animals.³ This does not sound like rest!

But we cannot miss this part of the passage, that we tie ourselves to Jesus and learn from him! Not just anyone, mind you, but the One who is gentle and humble. So first we show up and accept Jesus’ invitation. Then we follow. THIS is the way toward rest and peace.

Our God created and then rested. Our God freed the slaves and then commanded that they rest for a whole day a week. Our God comes to us in Jesus, offering not a lack of burden, but accompaniment and rest on the way! Do you hear God inviting you to lay down your burdens and accept this gift of rest?

In Hebrews chapter 4 a phrase is repeated five times in just eleven verses referring to Sabbath: Enter God’s rest. We are not just talking about any old rest here. This is God’s rest. What is God’s rest like? How is it different?

We all have ways we like to relax, things we might do for entertainment. And this is all well and good. But there are times when I know that my soul is calling for a different kind of rest. And a TV show or scrolling my phone will leave me feeling more depleted

³ Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, eds., *Feasting on the Gospels. Matthew*, First edition, A Feasting on the Word Commentary (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 299.

and unsatisfied. God invites us to enter God's deep rest, a place for healing, a place to let go and be. This is a rest that I think we really need these days.

I am a head type on the enneagram, so I operate in my head a lot. Calming my mind is HARD. But it is also the most restful and healing practice for me, precisely because it counters where I spend a lot of my time. Maybe you, too, are invited to practice resting your busy mind. Or maybe you are always on the go, and your body needs a rest of stillness or of solitude.

What might entering God's rest look like for you?

You may be thinking about rest as part of a Sabbath day, but we can also enter God's rest in moments every day and throughout our weeks.

- Maybe for you it *is* practicing silence, stillness, or solitude.
- Or maybe you are drawn to nature and a walk in the woods will be the rest you need.
- You could plan one special restful thing to do on the Sabbath, like a nap or reading a book alone or with your kids.
- Maybe you want to have a day, or time each day, away from social media and emails.
 - We have not talked about the impact of social media and technology on our lives, but I wonder if that is one thing in particular that has robbed us of rest: literal sleep, peace of mind, and gaps of time to just be.
- You might find rest in reading God's word.
- Or through music or art

I want to end the sermon today by offering you a practice for this week. I encourage you to read Matthew 11: 28-30 or to focus on verse 28 as an opening to a few minutes of silence and resting in God. What if we did this every day for a week?

(I will lead us in this practice together now. After a moment of silence we will move directly into our song of response. If you would like to have the music in front of you for that song, you can open now to page 683.)

Let's close our eyes and take a deep breath.

Hear these words from Jesus:

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.