

But What Kind of Rest?

Sermon on Sabbath for 2022-09-04

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Come to me all ye who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest!

I want to wrap myself up in this passage and swing with it in the hammock for a while.

But oh the idea of rest can be so complicated.

Sometimes it is hard to rest because we don't have enough help, and sometimes it is hard to rest because others need our help and we are uncomfortable with the luxury of resting. .

Sometimes it is hard to rest because the list of necessary tasks is yet long.

Sometimes it is hard to rest because when we do others do our work instead of trusting us to pick it back up in our own time.

Sometimes it is hard to rest because other people don't respect our boundaries.

Sometimes it is hard to rest because we do not respect our own boundaries.

We have this communal relationship to rest, don't we? Over-functioning and under-functioning both disrupt rest. Rest is hard to come by.

This is Labor Day weekend in the United States, and so we planned this service with that in mind. We hold together rest from labor and the rest to which Jesus calls us. They inform each other but are not precisely the same thing.

Because Labor Day is a national holiday, many of you will get to choose whether and how you rest on that day. But perhaps, even if you are able to rest from work, you will not be able to rest from all that must be done in your home, or for your family, or in the community. Maybe, weary as you are, you will spend the day catching up, nevertheless.

Labor Day, of course, grew out of a Labor Movement pushing against the inhumanity of working conditions at the height of the Industrial Revolution. I was visiting a history website which described it as one of "America's most dismal chapters", explaining that "the average American worked 12-hour days and seven-day weeks in order to eke out a basic living." Of course there were so many things about the working conditions that made that chapter dismal.

But Americans are still seeking out a living. And Americans still struggle to set appropriate boundaries between work and the rest of our living. And Americans are still woefully short on paid vacation, paid sick leave, paid family leave, and paid personal leave.

We find ourselves wrestling with rest in the midst of a culture centered around productivity that is unsustainable if not immoral. It seems the labor movement has more to do.

And though we know that there is something more for us than work, we wrestle, perhaps, with claiming rest when others cannot, when the economy is broken, when there are injustices to dismantle and bodies to heal. But to what kind of rest are we called?

There are 8 types of rest, according to something that came across my desk this week. 8 types. What would be on your list of types of rest?

Here are the 8 that I saw:

- Stillness to decompress
- Permission not to be helpful
- Connection to art and nature
- Time away
- Solitude to recharge
- A break from responsibility
- Choosing something “unproductive”
- Safe space

I wonder which of those resonate with you? For which of these do you most long? Do you achieve some of this rest? Does some of it seem unattainable?

Where does the rest for which you yearn overlap with the rest to which we are called as those who worship the living God, who follow Jesus?

When read in the NRSV, both of today’s scripture passages include the promise, “I will give you rest.”

In Exodus, God speaks to an anxious Moses, called to leadership, not sure of how he will manage. “My presence will go with you,” says God. “I will give you rest.”

In the gospel reading, Jesus has been teaching about repentance when he turns to this: “Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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.”

But what kind of rest? What is this rest promised by the Holy? “I will give you rest.” Is this sleep? Peace? Solitude? A break from responsibility?

The version of these passages found in The Message gives color to this promise.

In the Message, the Exodus passage doesn’t even use the word “rest.” Where the NRSV says “I will give you rest,” the Message has God say, “My presence will go with you. I’ll see the journey to the

end.” This is, then, a story of accompaniment. The rest promised to Moses is rooted in the assurance that Moses will not be alone. .

In the Message, the Gospel passage is even more colorful. *“Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. 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.”* Where God promises accompaniment to Moses, in this passage, Jesus invites the hearer to keep company. We are invited to accompany, to those this.

Now THAT feels important. You will recover your LIFE! You will learn the unforced rhythms of GRACE. You will learn to live FREELY and LIGHTLY. The rest promised by Jesus is spacious - it is rooted in freedom from strictures, in breaking free from religion that is bound by checking boxes. Where the rest promised to Moses is rooted in accompaniment, the rest promised by Jesus is rooted in grace.

Significantly, the rest that Jesus is describing is something that counters performative religiosity. Jesus is saying something like: I know you are concerned with Sabbath because it is required by the law, but following all of those rules has nothing to do with real rest. And so, even in the midst of calling this followers to recover their lives in the unforced rhythms of grace, Jesus is unconcerned that his disciples have broken Sabbath rules by finding food. Similarly, in another telling, Jesus doesn’t hesitate to heal a man on the Sabbath, despite the grumblings of the rule-keepers. Because, again, these rules are simply not what Sabbath is about.

Sabbath is about recovering our lives - and we cannot do that if we are not also participating in the recovery of life for those around us.

“If you had any idea what this Scripture meant—‘I prefer a flexible heart to an inflexible ritual’—you wouldn’t be nitpicking like this. The Son of Man is no yes-man to the Sabbath; he’s in charge.”

There is no question that we are called to rest. The God who created the heavens and the earth, the seas and all that live in them, rested. Jesus who healed and taught and threw over tables rested. The promise “I will give you rest” is one that we can write on our hearts. And though we yearn for many types of rest, the Holy rest promised to us - to you, and to me, is rest in the midst of our doing.

And our rest is tied up in the rest of others. And so we must find a way to rest our spirits and our bodies in ways that are faithful to the work to which we are called in the communities in which we live and move.

We cannot wait for our work to be done to rest. And we cannot wait for rest to come to work. For our work is never done. We rest in the midst of it. We rest to reclaim our lives. And then we live in ways that create a world in which others might rest, too. Perhaps, then, it is not the labor movement that still has work to do. But you, and I, and all who seek to follow the risen Lord.

Family of God, what kind of rest will help you recover your life? Will you rest in the presence God promises? In the unforced rhythms of grace to which Jesus calls us? Will you choose life that allows others to also, rest?