

Matthew 11:25-30
July 9, 2023

Rest

Whenever I hear the word, “rest,” I usually think of a good night’s sleep. In Matthew’s gospel Jesus speaks in terms of being “weary and burdened,” and one gets the idea that he is not referring to something that can be cured by sleep. If he does not mean “tired” from a long day at the office or the farm or the factory, then what does he mean? it stands to reason that he is not offering a nap as the solution. What could be meant by, “weary and burdened?” What is meant by “rest?”

Life has a quality to it that might fit the bill. There is a situation that can be denied or ignored, but not escaped, and thus works its affects regardless of whether or not it is acknowledged. Sometimes it is called, “The Human Condition.” It can be dismissed as if it is a bother, like a fly buzzing around, but it is more than that. So let us think about it for a few minutes this morning.

We have spoken before of anxiety associated with death, guilt, and emptiness, or perhaps in the more homiletical terms of the theologian Tillich; mortality, morality, and meaning. None of us chose to come to life, but instead we were born without permission and given *no* control over the circumstances; the place of our birth, the community of family and friends, or the historical period, the social and political arrangement.

And with all that givenness, we get a period of years, less than 100 for most, and sometimes not nearly that

much, and then our time is up. In spite of efforts to remedy the situation through medical treatments, healthy living, life extension technologies like singularity, and attempts to participate in positive social change, there isn’t really anything we can do about it. Mortality is burdensome.

Furthermore, given this situation, one might think there would not be a sense of responsibility for any of it. This life is inexorably given, but the opposite is true, we *are* responsible. There is such a thing as the moral demand. We have read a little about it from Paul, in the famous 7th chapter in his Letter to the Romans.

Even more, we are forced to conclude that one way or another, to one degree or another, we have all failed to measure up. We are skilled at inappropriately imposing guilt upon one another, and quite frankly, upon ourselves. This skill is not helpful. Even so, we cannot escape the demand. “I do not do the things I want, but the things I do not want, these things I do.” Morality is burdensome.

Yet, here we are, alive and taking nourishment, and while we are forced to accept life as grace, as a gift, we are nonetheless responsible for how we live it. One can say, “our lives have been given to us, and our lives have been asked of us.” The long and short of these questions is that how we live matters. Life is *meaningful*. And yet the testimony of many people is that they are not sure, sometimes life’s meaning escapes us. The quest after meaning is burdensome.

The combined affects of these realities is that our life has a wearing-out quality about it, even when we don't have burdensome lives, although we often have burdensome lives. In addition to the demands of daily life, it is possible to experience anxiety in terms of life's traumas.

When things happen; a health crisis, a crisis of any kind really, life can weigh us down. And this not only in the personal sense. We are also affected by the crisis of the world, the history that we live. Even if it doesn't affect us directly.

Weary, burdened, and even exasperated . . . thus we are. One temptation is to skip over the difficult facets of life, not speak of them, try not even to think of them. We even sometimes have a way of imposing guilt on ourselves over complaints, even silent complaints, it reveals ingratitude. Others have things worse.

But it is okay to linger here. It is okay to reflect upon life's painful side. For two reasons, first because the gospel message assures that God meets us in them; that our experiences are meaningful, that is, they teach us something and help us grow. "We rejoice in our sufferings," Paul writes, "because suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character hope." I suppose sometimes we might be willing to trade a little hope for a little less trouble.

The second reason is because if we never allow ourselves to notice life's tragic side, we will likely miss

the wonderful side too. If we don't reflect upon wearisome things, we may fail to notice the beautiful things as well . . . *things associated with rest.*

We can relate to the metaphor of work and rest because we live through it daily. Each new day begins refreshed and ready, and ends tired and sleepy. The weekly cycle of work and rest; Sabbath, if we observe it, is meant to acknowledge a larger cycle, that over time a change of pace is refreshing and renewing.

It represents an even larger acknowledgment spiritually, that life wears us down, even if we sleep each night, take a day off each week, and get a vacation now and again. The cycle of birth to maturity, aging to death, points to this same feature of life.

Jesus speaks of the way in which life's work becomes burdensome. He refers to the weight we all carry, of the worlds' pain, and the burden of our own situations, the Human Condition.

His word to us, which is the gospel word, is that when we come to Jesus in faith, the *burden* is lifted in a way that may not immediately remove us from the earthly circumstances of work, trouble, and trauma, but takes away the power of it all, to harm, removes the sense of ultimacy from it.

"For my yoke is easy and my burden is light," says Jesus, and in ways we find hard to explain, faith allows us to experience this most precious kind of

rest. Paul calls it, “the peace that surpasses knowledge.” It is a divine peace.

I *would* say, “take a deep breath, and let God’s grace wash over you,” except I know that part of life’s hold over us is that we can’t overcome its weight on our own. The whole point of biblical faith is that it starts us out with the acknowledgment of our weakness in these matters.

This is a divine rest . . . like God on the 7th day, and Jesus gives . . . the source is not our deep breath, or any other effort to attain it, but the grace of God.

As it turns out, when we seek it, practice it, come to it, it has a way of manifesting itself to us.

So let faith direct your life in the pathway of rest, make the time for it, practice restoration, forgiveness, reconciliation where possible, not to achieve it or earn it, but simply to accept the gift and see if at some point you do not also sense the *restorative* grace of God at work in you.

Let God receive all glory and praise . . . amen.