

October 1, 2023
Matthew 11:25-30
"An Invitation to Rest"
Meghan Brown

Rev.

The way I think about rest has changed over the last few years, largely influenced by the theologian and artist Tricia Hersey. She wrote a book called "Rest is Resistance." Although I don't pretend to always do it well, I have always loved the idea of sabbath, as a way to rest our bodies and minds and establish healthy boundaries between work life and homelife. But in a lot of ways, rest for me has always been the means to fuel whatever came next. To rest meant to recuperate and renew my strength so that I could eventually put in more effort and energy. Through that lens, rest is productive, it's not an end in and of itself. But Hersey invites us to claim rest as a divine, human right, not a luxury or a means to an end. Hersey speaks specifically from a lens of black liberation-she wants to reclaim rest for people for whom it has been most out of reach- but her invitation to rebuke oppressive structures is something we can all learn from. Rest in her lens has the power to liberate us from a world that tells us our worth is measured by our productivity and success.

Of course, with the government shutdown looming, an election year just around the corner, and the pace of life back to pre-Covid levels of normal, it seems like there's more work to be done than ever. What does rest look like when the days ahead are uncertain? Or when we're forced to pause? Or when we feel like we're just barely gotten back into the rhythm of things?

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Jesus' invitation to rest is a balm in a world that measures worthiness in the length of our to-do lists, the colleges we are accepted into, how packed our CV is or how essential our work is deemed. It's no wonder that we can be left burnt out and depleted. Frankly, even the Church can make us wonder if rest is part of God's plan for us-have we been faithful enough, generous enough, are we doing enough to help others, have we earned it? Someone's got to serve on those Committees and teach Sunday School, after all. Sometimes even Jesus himself can give us mixed messages, for as much as he invited Martha to pause from her work and sit with him, Jesus has also chided his disciples for falling asleep on him and warned us to be watchful at **all** times. So, where's this rest Jesus is really talking about?

When we meet Jesus in our text, he has been preaching throughout Galilee and it has not been going well. The gospel of Matthew portrays Jesus as the Healing Messiah, the Servant, and the Son of Man, who continues his mission to Israel even as the opposition of Israelite leaders intensifies. Shortly before this passage, even John the Baptist questions him from prison, "*Are **you** the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*" he asks. Jesus' calls for repentance have fallen on deaf ears and it seems **everyone** is exasperated: "God speaks to you through John the Baptist, and you say he has a demon. I come to you eating and drinking with the people and you call me a drunkard and a glutton and a friend of sinners." Jesus complains. Whatever tactic God uses to reach us, we will not be satisfied.

The Gospel of Matthew is believed to have been written by a subject of the Roman empire, which was a hierarchically ordered, advanced agrarian society with almost no middle class. Jesus' solidarity with the peasants, fisherman, lepers, bandits and beggars put him at odds with the ruling class. Jesus' message about the kingdom of heaven stands in contrast with the

kingdom of Rome. Who is the Messiah and for whom is this good news? Jesus' message had economic and political implications, not just theological.

And yet, just like today, in the midst of this battle for the ownership of truth and righteousness, the people were weary. They were tired and anxious, hungry and overworked. It is these people to whom Jesus says, *"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."*

Jesus goes on to tell them: *"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me."* Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor describes the difference between single yokes and shared yokes, which would have been common farm tools. A single yoke fits across a person's shoulders with buckets hung from poles on each side. With a single yoke, *"human beings can carry almost as much as donkeys. They will tire easily and have to rest, their shoulders will ache all the time . . . but it is possible to move great loads from one place to another using a single creature under a single yoke."*

But the shared yoke, she writes, works very differently. *"A well matched pair of creatures can all work all day because one can rest a little while the other pulls. They can take turns bearing the brunt of the load; they can cover for each other without ever laying down their burden because their yoke is a shared one." At the end of the day, they will be tired, but not depleted."*

Jesus brought this message of good news to a world full of weary people-and that message still stands to the weary among us. Baptist Preacher Kathy Donley writes, *"Many of us are carrying single yokes, trying to do it all and carry all the weight alone, while Jesus is calling us to a shared yoke."* Do we have ears to hear this invitation today?

Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. When we invite others to pray with us and for us, we allow ourselves to rest from bearing our troubles alone. As you'll see through the prayer team's devotionals this week, even those with a strong prayer life still struggle and doubt. I am grateful for their reflections, because they invite us to be honest and real with one another. By praying with and for one another we practice bearing the yoke together.

"Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." When we offer prayers of confession in front of God and in community, we allow the full truth of ourselves to be known. *"We remember that what we confess is one aspect of our truth, but it's not the only thing,"* writes Professor of Theology Martha Moore-Keish. She goes on to say sin is framed by grace. Grace precedes and follows our confession of sin. When we bear this yoke of confession together, we open ourselves up to that grace, rather than bearing those truths alone in shame or despair.

"Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." When we pray for help and allow others to care for us, we stop living as though we are called to figure out this life on our own. This yoke of companionship can heal us and give us joy. Donley writes that *"The tie that binds us is the yoked life with God, the call to a way of life intent on Shalom, the restful well-being and peace which God desires for all creation. It is work, but work shared with Jesus and with each other. We may get tired, but not exhausted."* Where might you be yearning for rest? Might you find someone to share your yoke with you here? In this community? I sure hope you'll consider it. Because when we do, we see that Jesus has been here all along, waiting for us to say yes to that invitation to rest-in him and in each other.

I leave you with a paraphrase of our passage written by the Rev. Shannon Kershner Johnson:

“Come to me,” Jesus says.

“All you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens,
come to me.

All you who are tired of
trying to figure it out all by yourself, come to me.

All you who are worn out
from trying to keep life under your control.

All you who think the world is growing scarier day by day. All you who are confused and scared,
grieving and exhausted, lost and lonely, come to me.”

Come to me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light, and you will find rest. Amen.