

Sermon - Proper 11, Year B
Rest in Jesus
7/21/24

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

From my very first day at St. Luke's, I have included a verse from the Gospel of Matthew in the small welcome paragraph on the first page of the parish order of service: Jesus said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Matthew 11:28-29). At first blush, a parish church might not seem to be a place of rest. It is a place marked by lots of activity – worship, prayer, service, community outreach, pastoral care – music performances, recovery meetings, discussion groups, book studies, construction projects, and beyond. But at the center of these activities is not anxiety or productivity or personal enrichment. At the center of all of this activity is a great and merciful Silence. A tremendous and compassionate peace.

In the Gospel from St. Mark this morning, Jesus receives his disciples after they have done out and done the work he has given them to do. Just a few weeks ago, we heard Jesus instruct them to travel throughout the towns and villages, near and far, carrying nothing with them but the clothes on their back and the promises of redemption, and now they have returned to make their reports. As he receives them, Jesus does not submit a report card or pay them according to their success, but instead offers the most radical invitation: "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." Come away. Rest awhile.

It is this invitation that is at the heart of the life of a parish church. And it is certainly at the very center of the life of faith. For all that activity and discipleship are good and necessary, Jesus is quite clear that none of those good fruits will be sustained if they are not planted in the

rich soil of simply being together, in that great Silence, with God. Our souls begin in hiddenness: in the hiddenness of that place where God knew us before we were formed within the womb. We are meant to be renewed in heart and mind in that desert place, where only the voice of God can be heard. Come away. Rest awhile.

I am quite confident that I don't need to tell anyone in this room how radical an invitation this can be. We might look at the frenetic world around us and think that this is a uniquely modern problem, but it turns out that rest and silence have been radical ideas from the very beginning. In the book of Exodus, we find the story of Israel's enslavement in Egypt for hundreds of years. Hundreds of years of suffering, laboring, weeping, and dying at the hands of overseers who demand greater and greater output from their brickmaking. The work is brutal, constant, and ends only when someone at last collapses and dies, most likely in the midst of another task. When at last Moses leads the Israelites to their freedom across the Red Sea, and climbs to the top of Mount Sinai to receive the instructions and blessings of God, he returns down the mountain with the Ten Commandments. Here is the covenant, the eternal assurance of God's mercy and protection, and right in the middle we find the Fourth Commandment: "Remember the Sabbath Day, and keep it holy." Come away. Rest awhile.

Here we find God receiving a people who have nearly collapsed under the weight of oppression and slavery, and in his compassion, he presents them with a gift. Here is the day each week that is appointed solely for the enjoyment of God. Here is a day when you can be silent, be at prayer, know yourself to be a person who has been known in the heart of the Almighty since before you were formed in the womb. To rest is not only to set aside your labors, but to be free.

Jesus invites his disciples into this freedom as he bids them come and rest awhile. And he offers us this very same invitation. We cannot forget that physical rest is very much a part of the

whole invitation. The disciples are meant to rest their bodies, come away to that desert place – stop traveling, stop preaching, stop speaking, stop worrying, stop calculating. Tend to the physical needs that come along with being a person. We are not good preachers with a toothache. We are not always good neighbors when we are tired or very hungry.

And then what is sometimes the more difficult part: find rest for our souls. Perhaps the idea of finding rest for our souls sounds rather pious to you. Perhaps a bit mystic. Or simply impractical. We are not Teresa of Avila or St. John of the Cross, after all. I have prayed before it for many months, and the Christ upon this Cross over the altar has yet to come to life and ask me, like Thomas Aquinas, what reward I would have for my faithful efforts.

But I will tell you that we can all take great comfort here. Spiritual rest is for all of us, the pious and the skeptical, the gentle and the bold. Spiritual rest simply means clearing the space in our hearts and minds to enjoy God. This looks different for different people. For some of us, it means taking twenty minutes in the morning to sit in silence, offering our prayers for those we love and those we might struggle to love. For some of us, it means walking in the woods, letting the silence of the forest clear the noise from the clattering places of the heart. Some of us find silence in the midst of a chapter from the Bible or a prayer from a fourth century theologian or the poem of a dear friend. Whatever encourages you to listen and be still more than speak or move is a good place to begin.

On the morning of the Resurrection – that very first Easter morning – Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb of Jesus bearing spices and oil to anoint his body. When she arrives at the tomb, the stone has impossibly been rolled away, and the body of Jesus is not there. She weeps, and when she sees a stranger in the mists of that early morning garden, she begs him, “They have taken away my Lord. Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where and I will take him.” St.

John tells us that in her grief, Mary believed this man to be the gardener. Until this stranger speaks a single word into the dawn: “Mary.”

Into the unspeakable chasm of her pain, **Jesus speaks her name.** And she recognizes him. This is her Lord, standing before her, impossibly present and alive.

When we accept Christ’s invitation to rest, we prepare our hearts to hear our own name. At rest, we come away from the clamor and the need – perhaps even the grief – and we attune the great silence within us to hear the voice of God. Jesus said: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”