
Let It Go...and Rest

Matthew 11:28-30

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel
on July 6, 2014 by the Rev. Mel Williams

I'm exhausted....I'm stressed to the limit... I'm bone tired....I feel drained....I'm running on fumes... I'm on the edge of burnout.

Have you ever heard yourself or someone else say those words? At one time or another, most of us have been there. We live in a fast-paced world where we're often over-achievers, hurrying, rushing, working too hard until our energies are depleted and our well-being is in tatters.

And then we come to church. Welcome! Welcome to this church, this chapel---this place for tired, weary people. In our text for today, Jesus gives a clear invitation and a promise: "Come to me, you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

This week-end we've been celebrating American Independence and also honoring the 50th anniversary of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. With freedom and justice in our consciousness and conscience, I've been thinking about the Lady Liberty statue in NY Harbor with that inscription from Emma Lazarus: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Those words echo Jesus' invitation: Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden..."

We may come to church for many different reasons; maybe you've come to the Chapel today because Mama or Grandma said to go. Maybe you're here to enjoy the great organ, the brass ensemble, the singing, the grandeur of this cathedral. But we also know that too many of us come here stressed and worried, troubled and tired.

I once asked a wise friend, "What can we do when we face trouble after trouble and we're feeling overwhelmed?" She said "Breathe!" (EXHALE) We all need to exhale the anxieties, worries, and stress of our life, and wait for Jesus' promise to work its way, to inhale its way, into our insides. It's a kind of photosynthesis for the soul. We can exhale the carbons, the toxins; inhale the spiritual oxygen.

Jesus understood this need. He knew the importance of rest— time for replenishing his soul. People were often crowding around him; they wanted what he offered--- healing, forgiveness, courage, hope, life. Reynolds Price, beloved teacher at this institution, was reflecting on Jesus' life. He said, "The amazing thing about Jesus was his compassion. He never turned anyone away."

But after days of teaching and healing, when he felt his energy waning, Jesus would steal away to a lonely place to pray—to "rest." In the text today Jesus is giving us an invitation from his own practice: Come to me... and I will give you rest."

We've heard the text. Now let's do what it says! Let's take some silence, some time to rest, and allow Jesus' words to sink into our insides.

I invite you to get comfortable, close your eyes, and let's take two minutes to rest together as we meditate on Jesus' words. Exhale the stress, inhale the goodness. To those listening on the radio, please join us in these minutes of silence. "Come to me...and I will give you rest."

2 minutes of silence

What happens in the silence? If we can quiet our chattering "monkey mind" and be still, gifts are given that we cannot give ourselves.

Jesus gives us some hints about the gifts. Listen again: "Come to me..and rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

A yoke is a harness, like the yoke over the shoulders of an ox. But Jesus' yoke is not restrictive; it provides a useful structure. His yoke is easy. It's really a gift, a practice that harnesses for us a pathway to newness, aliveness. "Learn from this gift, this way that I offer you," Jesus says. "My burden is light." Did you get the double meaning? My burden is not heavy, but also..my burden is light--- energy.

With a little theological imagination, I want to suggest that there are at least four gifts wrapped in Jesus' invitation and promise. Gifts that come in the silence, when our heart is open.

1. The first is the gift of Sabbath time. Jesus is a Jew; he knows about Sabbath time. Sabbath provides the spacious context for Jesus' invitation. He's echoing one of the Ten Commandments: Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy. Sabbath is a gift, a day of rest. This rest is more than sleep; it's rejuvenation, restoration, re-connection to our life force, to full aliveness. In the Creation story God worked 6 days and then God rested on the seventh day. If it was good enough for God, it's good enough for us.

Our great Jewish tradition has perpetuated the Sabbath as a "sanctuary in time," as Rabbi Abraham Heschel calls it. A day of delight, a day to savor the world. Being rather than doing. Evelyn Underhill says that we spend our lives conjugating three verbs: to have, to want, and to do. But the essential verb is to be. Being restful means living in the present moment, not regretting the past or feeling anxious about the future.

Sabbath rest, if we practice it, infuses us with attention to the present moment. Mary Oliver writes, "I don't know exactly what prayer is, but I know how to pay attention." Attend to the present moment; it's where God shows up--- God's energy, God's peace.

In his invitation, Rabbi Jesus is offering Sabbath rest, and this rest is the pathway to renewed aliveness.

2. The second gift Jesus offers is release---the opportunity to let go of stresses and pressures, release the inner obstacles that block us. Since retiring as a Baptist pastor, I've been spending time at Durham Friends Meeting, sitting in silence with the Quakers. Recently in the Meeting we were sitting quietly, eyes closed. The windows were open to let in fresh springtime air. Children were playing outside, and I could hear a child in the distance, chanting or singing, over and over, "Let it go, let it go." I wondered if the children were tugging on a rope or a ball or some toy; but I heard the child's words as a direct message to me. "Let it go." Then it dawned on me that the child was actually singing the chorus from the recent Disney movie "Frozen." "Let it go, let it go." A little child shall lead us!

Whatever dilemma, problem, or anxiety is clogging our insides, "let it go." In the silence, this time of rest, I've sometimes imagined putting our anxieties on a little imaginary boat, and let them float off on the boat. Yes, the boat will come back, but keep putting the anxiety or worry on the boat. "Let it go." For fullness of life to develop, emptiness is essential. Let it go.

3. The third gift in Jesus' invitation is the gift of the inner wellspring: living water. When we can let it go, we're removing the debris from the wellspring, this inner wellspring that wants to flow freely, to give us fullness of life. That wellspring flows with goodness; it's the source of our aliveness. If we do our part in releasing the stresses, then calm energy, aliveness, can emerge—and it will even **gush**. One of the monks at the monastery where I go keeps saying to me, "Mel, let it gush, gush, gush."

It's his playful spiritual direction, referring to Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well. Jesus said to her, "I will give you living water that gushes up to eternal life." He doesn't mean life in the hereafter; he means life—capital L—in the herenow. Gushing up in the Now.

Jesus tells us, "I have come that you might have abundant life, fullness of life. (John 10:10) Not existence, not half-life, but aliveness, fullness of life. This life force comes to us from the inner wellspring—"that of God in every person," as the Quakers say. But to get to our True Self, we have to let it go—let go of our stuff, and get back to the source, the well.

Ira Progoff wrote a little book called *The Well and the Cathedral*. He said, "Long ago people discovered a well, and they came, year after year, to the well to drink the refreshing water. They felt healed, made whole by the water. Then someone said, Let's build a building over the well. They built a building. Years past and others said, Let's build a cathedral here. They built it. As the years past, this institutional church got bigger and bigger, and the people forgot about the well—the wellspring underneath.

4. When we go to the wellspring, the inner wellspring, and take it in, we may receive a fourth gift --- the gift of energy for our work in the world. If I don't find my way back to the wellspring, I will not have the energy and inner resources to do my work in the world.

Jesus is our role model; he was both a mystic and a social reformer; he was a contemplative and an activist. He was often going off to pray, to re-connect to the wellspring. Then he would head back to his ministry of compassion, justice, equality, non-violence. "My burden," he said, "is Light." Call it energy for goodness, for justice.

This pattern is the model for all of us. We all have our personal leadings, our callings for specific work that continues the mission of Jesus. For me, that calling is to help find ways to reduce the dreadful poverty around us—28% percent of Durham children living in poverty. In the area where we're focused in E. Durham, the child poverty rate is a shocking, shameful 63%. We've got to change it.

This is long-haul work, and we can't do it without daily attention to our inner life, getting back to the wellspring. Jesus is still teaching us this wisdom, handing us the gifts—Sabbath, release, wellspring, energy for mission. All for the purpose of abundant life, for us and those we serve.

Come to me, Jesus says—to my way, my practice. I will give you rest. This rest is better than sleep; it's rest for the soul. He's echoing Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd.God leads me beside still waters. God restores my soul." Restores my deepest self!

When we get to the place of genuine rest, we re-connect with the inner wellspring, the source of life, abundant life. Let's call it aliveness that gushes.

Come to me, Jesus says, and find life-giving rest.

Amen. So may it be.