

Finding Rest for Your Soul

Scriptures: Song of Solomon 2: 8-13

Matthew 11: 28-30

Now that July 4th has come and gone, how many of you, like me, are ready to kick back and welcome good old-fashioned summertime in full gear? I'm not one to lay some guilt trip on you about being in church this summer. In fact, I'm surprised any of you showed up here this morning at all, when you had so many good reasons not to! The July 4th weekend just past inaugurates the height of summer in New England, the time to rest and relax and just get away from it all.

So when was the last time you actually did just that? When was the last time you just closed the door on all your busyness and worries, on dismal news, Twitter and tweeting presidents and brewing world crises and so forth, and just headed out for some R & R? I mean a real dose of it, not just some little snip of it! When was it last, indeed, that your soul truly felt rested?

My wife Lucy and I spent the 4th of July week up in Maine, first at our family's cottage on the beach in Kennebunk, then driving our daughter up to Deer Isle, where she visited the family of a friend who has a summer place up there, and finally at Ocean Park near Old Orchard Beach, where Lucy was the guest preacher last Sunday at that summer community's historic "Temple." For those of you who go up to Maine, you'll remember the sign by the highway as you come off the bridge at Kittery, saying something like "*Welcome to Maine, Vacationland, The Way Life Should Be.*" It's almost as though as soon as we cross that bridge from New Hampshire on our way north that we find ourselves breathing easier. Life up there does indeed seem easier, with things moving kind of at a slower pace... just what the doctor ordered as a remedy to our regular dose of anxiety and stress!

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

These words of Jesus, first spoken to his disciples and to the crowds who were listening to him by the Sea of Galilee 2,000 years ago, may have been part of the inspiration that led the early pilgrims and pioneers to a New World as they sought a new life free from the cares of the Old World from which they'd come. They might also be particularly welcome words to many of us here today, who are needing to slow down after a frantic pace the past several months. It's comforting to know that life was never intended to be all hurry, hurry, hurry, and stress, stress, stress. Life includes down times, and rest and relaxation, empty spaces on our maps, and Sabbath time and holiday weekends every once in a while.

Too often we 21st Century Type-A personalities and high-achievers lose sight of this fact amidst our busy schedules and the multi-tasking we try to carry out, day in and

day out. Every now and then we need to slow down, take a detour or two from the path we intended to follow, and just look and listen for God.

“To bring some solitude into our lives,” wrote the late Dutch Jesuit priest Henri Nouwen, *“is one of the most necessary but also most difficult disciplines...Without a lonely place, our lives lose their meaning. Without silence, words become just noise. Without solitude, touch cannot heal. Without the presence of our Creator, our world becomes empty.”* 1

Our Creator, God, created us as mortal human beings, not as immortal supermen and women. God set certain limits on our abilities and our energies and our time. Having created us with limitations, God doesn't expect us to function as though we had no limitations. Why else do you think the concept of Sabbath rest has been such an important part of Judeo-Christian understanding and practice? Humans, as well as their Creator, need rest, some down time, and some space, to meet life as it comes to us, as it is given to us. God knows this about us. It's just us who live in denial much of the time about this truth. We think life is totally what we make of it, that it depends entirely on us and our efforts. How far from the truth this is!

“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me,” says Jesus, *“for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your soul.”* To find a little rest for our soul is not something we should feel guilty or ashamed of. As we see here in Scripture, it's a very human need that God is aware of and for which God is ready and willing to provide. We need to get away from it all every so often, to be renewed and restored to our right selves. We need to commune with our Creator, God, through whatever way gives us the best access to God's restorative power. For many of us, that means communing with nature, be it out in the woods, up at the lake or in the mountains, or out on an ocean beach... wherever, doing whatever it is that we truly love to do.

For us, living in urban and suburban settings, it's easy to get out of touch with our roots in the natural world and the further out of touch we get, the more burnt out and lifeless we can feel. Thomas Moore, in his book Care of the Soul, speaks of the need to reconnect ourselves with the Creation of which we're a part:

“Care for the world is a tending to the soul that resides in nature as well as in human beings... Without a felt connection to things we become numb to the world and lose that important (sense of) home and family. The homelessness we see on our city streets,” he writes, *“is a reflection of a deeper homelessness we feel in our hearts...”* 2

The Old Testament lesson from the Song of Solomon that Matt read is part of a love sonnet that quite surprisingly found its way into the canon of Scripture. But it speaks of an elemental human love and longing to be part of the Created order, in relationship to other creatures and to the God who created us all.

“Arise my love, my fair one, and come away. For now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come.” What

a tonic for our weary, traffic-frayed Massachusetts nerves! These ancient verses still ring with their beauty over all the centuries of time since they were first written. They capture the longing we feel to join in communion with the one we love most, and together to experience anew the beauties and mysteries of the creation and the creatures who inhabit it. The world is a playground, in this view, which God has given us to leap and dance in, to roll and play in, and to enjoy to the fullest. Oh to be a child again, and to roll in a meadow, down a grassy hillside! “*Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away!*”

To step out of our commutes and our routines, to rediscover ourselves and our place in the world sometimes can be a bit unnerving, and even threatening. We get so used to the ruts we live in, that to suddenly find ourselves out of them and in new surroundings can be disconcerting.

I remember the feeling I had at the Detroit airport a few years ago, when I was making a connecting flight from Minneapolis-St. Paul (where I lived at the time) to the East Coast at the beginning of a summer vacation. The new terminal had just been opened there, with its monorail train and futuristic design. I found myself wandering along the concourse, looking for my connecting gate for the flight to Portland, Maine, and feeling very much at sea, as though I were a faceless, anonymous man in the crowd in this surrealistic setting. Here were all these other travelers, like myself, hurrying to get somewhere else, disconnected from their lives, like inhabitants of some time warp. Nobody here knew me or cared about me. I was totally alone, in the midst of a crowd.

Yet it was good for me to be having those feelings. What was going on was that I had abruptly stepped out of my everyday life and was experiencing the disconnect before a reconnect. In that transit zone gap I was encountering myself as one little part of the great flow of humanity as it hurries along from Point A to Point B, and it kind of put it all in a new perspective for me. You come to realize that you’re not nearly as important or unique as you thought you were, that the world will hurry on without you when you’re gone, and that you hardly make a ripple in the great sands of time. And when I finally got to Maine and spent some time sitting on the ocean shore in Kennebunk watching the waves come in and the waves go out, it all put me in touch with the Creator again, closer than usual to the One who’s existed since before the beginning of time, who formed me and all the other creatures who inhabit this world, and who’ll be here long after we’re all gone. Somehow I need to get in touch with this reality every now and then, and come back from vacation renewed and refreshed and reaffirmed.

Whoever said that living, loving and believing in God had to be hard? Summer is the time to relax and rejoice, to let down our heavy burdens, and find rest for our soul. God wants this for us, not just in summer, but perhaps *especially* in summer, a season of Sabbath, if you will. God offers us grace, the gift of Creation, the chance to enjoy what God has created without having to earn it or deserve it. It’s just there, to be appreciated, like the moon on a summer’s night or the cumulus clouds billowing on the horizon on a midsummer’s afternoon.

Living in New England we don't have to go far to enjoy these wonders. In fact they can be as close as our own back yard or front porch. They're not hard to find. One of the ways I've loved most just to let down on a summer evening is to go out on our deck up in Maine and watch the clouds billow and the lightning flash as a storm approaches from the west across the bay from Wells. Back when our kids were little in Minnesota, they used to sit with me on our porch swing and together we'd count the seconds between flash and rumble, figuring out how close the center of the storm was getting to where we were watching it from. Then the rain would come down in buckets, the street would flow with rivers of water, the lightning would crack and the thunder would roar. And then as quickly as it had come up, it would all pass over, and the air would become clean and clear once again.

Doesn't this say something about life to you? It seems I always learn something anew about the power of God from watching a thunderstorm, about how troubles don't last always, and how after the deluge everything can become fresh and new once again. I'd never want to live in a part of the world that didn't have a few good summer thunderstorms!

So let's join with each other today in praise and adoration of our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, the One whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light. Let's put aside our weariness, our troubles and our cares. Let's be open to the renewing breeze of the Spirit and the gracious gift of Christ's life, given for us, and let us commune with our Creator and the great cloud of witnesses surrounding us here at this table. Then let's get out of here and go enjoy this great wide world with a sense of wonder, reverence and joy!

Yes, thanks be to God!

Amen.

1. Nouwen, Henri, Out of Solitude, Ave Maria Press, c. 1974
2. Moore, Thomas, Care of the Soul, Harper Collins, c. 1994

