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“The Three “R’s” of Summer”

Genesis 32:22 – 32

Matthew 11:25 – 30

Text: “Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

. . . Matthew 11:28

This week finds us in the middle of summer. We have endured a major heat wave, and have now settled back in to the usual hot and humid days. Many of you have had, or hopefully, soon will have, an opportunity to leave your normal routines and go to the beach, the mountains, the lakes, perhaps even out of country. In other words, it is the normal vacation season. So I would like to offer a few thoughts about vacations – or at least a break from the usual routine – and what that might mean for us in terms of our faith. In other words, how do we observe what Sabbath rest can be.

My wife Deb, who knows of, but does not understand, my penchant for sleeping in the morning – well, compared to her; she is often up at 5 am – said to me after I told her what I was preaching on rest this week, “Oh, you’re preaching on what you do best!” (It’s always nice to know where your support is.)

But, in truth, regardless of my seeming sloth prior to the civilized hours of the pm, rest is not something I do particularly well. Even when I take a day off, unless I am out of town, work seems to haunt me or hunt me down and find me. Of course I am a good enabler of that; I take my blackberry with me and my computer so I can stay on top of Emails. And I know that I am not very different that most of the rest of you when you go on vacation.

Now the point of this is not trying to earn a merit badge for being a workaholic, or seek your pity. Rather it is confessional. You see, to live as a disciple, not only do we have a right to rest; not only are we invited or even encouraged to rest, **we are called to rest**. As Jesus said in Matthew’s Gospel, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

So today I offer three thoughts – the three “R’s” of rest: relief, release, and relaxation.

1.) Relief. “Come to Me, all who labor, . . . and I will give you rest.” I don’t think that it would be a surprise to any of you for me to say something about the inordinate amount of pressure in this part of the world. Most of you know that prior to 2005, my ministry was in the greater Boston area, and I thought there was work pressure there! But when I got to the Washington area, after I got over the novelty and the energy of being in “the world’s most powerful city” I found that pressure ratcheted up by two – three notches. When I was pastor of St. Luke’s UMC I found that many of my younger parishioners wanted to be at work a good half hour before their boss got in, and would always make it a point to stay after the boss left; all of this done with the intent of both

achieving and excelling. That coupled with the traffic woes, the high cost of housing, it is no wonder that this area exhibits a huge amount of stress. Suffice it to say that this pressure drives us to an incredible amount of labor.

It is an easy thing with which to identify, especially when it comes time to think about vacation leave. Unfortunately many of us schedule our vacations in much the same manner we would schedule a business trip. We spend weeks looking forward to it, and then find it usually takes the first week just to unwind, the second week to get accustomed to a slower pace, and then the first week back to work we find ourselves both recovering and getting caught up on all the work we didn't get done. Sometimes we even say we need a vacation to "rest" from our vacation. But . . . we are right back in "the grind." Because of this, some people find it more laborious even to take a vacation. For such people there almost seems to be a badge of honor in saying, "I haven't taken a vacation in years." We can easily miss the fact that recreational vacations are for re-creation.

I once heard a story about a boy who had trouble with grammar, and in particular always said, "I have went." After many polite and gentle corrective efforts his teacher decided that drastic and "good-ole-fashioned" action needed to be taken. So the teacher had the boy stay after school and write on the blackboard (whiteboard?) 200 times, "I have gone." The poor lad labored away for what to him and his 10-year-old mind, what seemed to be an eternity. When he finally finished, lo and behold, the teacher was nowhere to be found. So the boy left a note: "I have finished and I have went home."

The point is even if we have taken our vacations, we have went on working the remainder of the year. . . . But the rest Jesus offers to those who labor is more than the once-a-year rest; and, it is more renewing and energizing than the annual interlude we take.

Jesus offers the relief of rest to those who labor. Jesus reminds us that the Sabbath was made for persons and not person for the Sabbath. (Mark 2:27) Indeed, God labored six days in creating the world, but on the seventh day God rested. Most of us don't have much trouble with the work part of the creation story. Hard work is part of the protestant ethic, and the pressure to work hard to excel comes up in aces in this part of the world. No, work is not our problem; it's the Sabbath rest that gives us trouble.

The traditional Jewish Sabbath laws are an observance of the Sabbath being a time to cease creating and to pause giving praise for God's creation and the part we humans, as partners with God, have in creation. The Sabbath is a time to appreciate, give thanks, praise and to worship the God Who creates all things. It acknowledges a day of rest and renewal to take stock of who we are, what we have done, what we plan to do, and to measure it in accordance with our faith. Namely, the Sabbath is the time for us to ask, "is our work consistent with God's will and God's creation?"

The relief of rest is available to us when we take stock of our labors to discern if they are consistent with our God Who created the earth and sky and all that is in them – Who then rested and called it all "good." It is then that we receive the relief that the renewal of rest offers when we turn to Jesus.

2.) **Release.** If rest gives us relief from our labors, then those who are heavy laden are given release. Hard labor is one thing, but being heavy laden is a psychological and spiritual condition that oppresses and robs people of their freedom. It is a condition that may originate externally, but then changes so that the restrictions and bonds are internalized and our psyches become chained and we are no longer free.

“Come to Me,” says the voice of Jesus. And to those who respond to the invitation and given release. In Luke’s Gospel Jesus describes his call to ministry: “I have come to proclaim **release** to the captives and set at liberty those who are oppressed.”

Robert Raines, in his book, *Living the Questions*, relates the story of being in a therapy group. It describes what release can do. He writes:

In the sparring conversation a sore spot was touched in me. An ache started moving. I knew I was going to cry. I hadn’t cried for years, maybe decades. I resisted; my neck muscles distended until my chin hit the table and the tears of 40 years poured out. The heaving hurts of all my life shook loose the tight identities of person and profession. The frail structures of my inner and outer being were overwhelmed. I went out into the night alone, groping among my multiple selves.

(Raines weaves the Genesis story of Jacob wrestling with the angel of God by quoting from the passage):

“And Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.”

Raines then says:

Do you know what it is to be mugged by some awful power in the night? Sometimes an inner ache breaks the bonds of polite control and leaves us quivering with questions. Sometimes external events destroy our neat/obsolete design in the sky and leave us shivering with fearful fantasies.

(Again quoting from Genesis, Raines writes,)

When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched the hollow of Jacob’s thigh and Jacob’s thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then the man said, “let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” And the man said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” Then the man said, “Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with [people] and have prevailed” . . . And there he blessed him.

(Raines continues,)

. . . As a child I learned to deny my demons in the dark, repress my negative feelings, hold in my tears, muffle my passion, and cover my anger. [It was] surface harmony at the cost of emotional honesty. . . . Letting the demon go without a blessing. Since [that therapy group], I have been learning that the way to drain my demons of their destructivity is to wrestle them to a blessing, to refuse to let them go until they yield me their creative energy.

. . . Sometimes my demons turn into angels before my eyes. The poet Rilke asks, “How should we be able to forget those ancient myths that are at the beginning of all peoples, the myths about dragons that at the last moment turn

into princesses; perhaps the dragons of our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us once beautiful and brave.”

And again quoting from Genesis, Raines writes:

So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” The sun rose upon him as he passed . . . limping.

By wrestling with God, Jacob was given release from the demons that oppressed, bound and restricted him. . . . And with his release, Jacob was given a blessing, and limped out in the sunlight. Jesus said, “come to me, . . . all who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Release from our restrictive burdens is the second “R” of summer – an integral part of the Sabbath rest.

3.) *Reconciliation.* Jesus came to earth to reconcile us to God’s wholeness for which we are created. To this end God calls all of us who labor to come to God and experience the relief of rest. Jesus also proclaims liberty to the oppressed and came to give release to those held captive by the bonds of oppression – physical, psychological, and those societal bonds such as racism, sexism, ageism and classism.

But more than this – at work is Jesus’ invitation, “Come to Me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” What really is happening when we respond to that invitation is that we enter into the Sabbath rest which unites us with God as the Kingdom of God breaks into our lives – we become reconciled with God. Then we are able to do as God did after laboring at the creation for six days – we are able to look around at all that is created – both by God and the work we have labored at – and say, “that’s good!”, and then rest and enjoy it. That is the Sabbath rest – reconciled with God, able to say our labors were part of our partnership with God in the ongoing creation and say, “look what I created – look at my labor done through the gifts God gave me – that’s good, that’s God’s!”

The Sabbath rest renews us to examine who we are and what we do in our relationship and in our labors to see if we are aligned with God’s Will as being one who does not cause others to be heavy laden – and if we see they are, to give them release.

The Sabbath rest releases us from that which restricts and binds us, allows us to be reconciled with God, and its rest renews us. The Sabbath rest prepares us to carry on, unafraid – for we know that the labor we do is part of God’s creation. The Sabbath rest is so calming, so freeing, that we know that Christ’s yoke is easy and Christ’s burden is light that we are reconciled with God, released from our heavy burdens, and rested to resume our partnership in God’s great creation.