

Pentecost 5 / July 5, 2020

Matthew 11:28

“Come to me, are who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

Do you get enough rest? According to sleep research the optimum amount of sleep required for physical and mental well-being is between seven and nine hours a day, or night I suppose. Do you get that much sleep? Of course the amount of sleep necessary varies from person to person and with the long summer days, we may need less sleep to feel rested than in the dark of winter. Perhaps a better question would be, ‘do you feel rested with the amount of sleep you get each night? According to most research, the average North American doesn’t get enough sleep each night to feel rested. I stayed awake all night thinking about that!

Part of the problem may be our attitude towards sleep in particular and rest in general. Perhaps it’s the remnants of the Protestant Work Ethic, but the ability to sleep is not generally regarded as a virtue, unless you are a cat! A man applied to work on a farm. He had all the skills necessary, plus a wealth of experience. The farmer asked, ‘if he had any special qualities, gifts or abilities that he should hire him?’ The man replied, “I can sleep well at night.” The farmer thought that was an odd answer, but the man was qualified, he needed help and was intrigued to see what he meant, so he hired him.

A few weeks into his tenure, a sudden storm blew in at night. The farmer wanted to make sure everything was secured on his property. He went to waken his hired man to help him check, but he couldn’t get him up. The farmer said to himself, ‘He sure can sleep!’ ‘He slept himself right out of a job.’ He was determined to fire him first thing in the morning. But, as he inspected his property, he discovered why the man could sleep; everything was secured, all the doors were shut tight and the animals were safe in their stalls and pens. He did his job so well, there was nothing to keep him awake at night.

Jesus could sleep well too! Once as the disciples were in their fishing boat on the Sea of Galilee, a storm blew in. Jesus was sleeping, but the disciples were a frenzy of activity. They battened down the hatches, trimmed the sails and did whatever else fishermen do when a storm batters their vessel and they are afraid. Jesus just slept! The disciples were furious. How could Jesus sleep? They wondered, ‘Didn’t He care about them, or Himself?’ Nothing makes anxious people angrier than someone who is unaffected by the seriousness of the situation; especially one who sleeps in the midst of danger. When He awoke, Jesus calmly rebuked the storm and quieted the sea. Then he asked, “Why were you afraid, O you of little faith?” Why were they afraid? Obviously they were afraid, because of the storm! On the surface it may have seemed so; and they may have thought so themselves. But the real reason they were afraid, was because their faith in Jesus was so little. A little faith in Jesus can cause great fears!

Jesus faced the same storm and he was so unafraid that if they hadn’t woken Him, He would have slept right through it. Jesus could rest, because He is the Son of God. If they had believed He was the Son of God, they would have rested and been at peace too. If they would have believed that and trusted Jesus, they could have slept through the storm too. Consider this: Jesus is the Son of God. They had Jesus with them in the boat. Jesus is with us in the boat too! He calls us to Himself that He may give us rest. He calls now, “Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.” He gives us rest, because He is our peace with the Father in heaven.

Besides being physical necessities, rest and sleep are important concepts in the scriptures and signs of God’s favour. The Sabbath was a day of rest, in which Israel rested in God’s peace! In Psalm 127 the psalmist sang, “It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for He gives to His beloved sleep.” God gives His beloved sleep! Jesus is the beloved Son of God and God gave Him sleep! Sleep is a blessing that God gives to His beloved children for the sake of Jesus!

On the other hand, sleeplessness is associated with sinfulness and sometimes with sin. It’s not a sin to have insomnia, but sometimes sin keeps us awake at night! We have heard the expression, “There is no rest for the wicked.” It’s variation on Isaiah chapter 57, where the wicked are likened to the restless sea, which never stops roiling and boiling. And so the Lord says, “There is no peace for the wicked.”

There is no rest for the wicked, because they seek not God’s favour nor desire His forgiveness. In Psalm 36 the psalmist pictures the wicked lying awake at night, planning evil and plotting trouble in his bed. Inner turmoil is not a sin, neither is sleeplessness, but they certainly are an effect of sin and a sign that we have sin and we live in a sinful world. So if you fall asleep in this sermon, consider yourself blessed!

Jesus calls us to Himself that we may have rest and by that He doesn't simply mean sleep. He means the rest of a peaceful relationship with God, based on the forgiveness of sin. He means the rest of knowing God loves us and believing that He has shown His love, by giving Jesus to bear the burden of our sin on the cross. God gives us rest, by forgiving our sins and promising us eternal life in our baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection.

Jesus gives us rest and refreshment in the Holy Spirit, whenever we read the sacred scriptures. They are written that we may believe that He is the Christ and have life in His Name. Jesus gives us rest whenever we return to the promise of our baptism in repentance and hear again His words of absolution in the forgiveness of our sin. We have rest, because Jesus is our peace. He took away the sin that burdens our conscience through the sacrifice of His cross. He brings us into the presence of God; now through faith, fully and forever in His resurrection. Jesus gives us rest in the peace of knowing that in Him, nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God.

I'm sure we've all heard the expression, "Rest in Peace," or its abbreviation, "RIP." We associate it with death, because you generally see it in cemeteries, inscribed on head stones. But it's not really about death. It's about Christ and His peace, in which we rest, whether we are dead or alive. It is inscribed on the headstones of Christians, not because they are dead; the whole cemetery thing makes that fairly obvious. It is inscribed on headstones, so the living remember the dead are alive in Christ and rest in His peace, awaiting the fullness of rest with us, in the resurrection to life everlasting. The epitaph reminds us that whether we live in the world, or our bodies rest in the grave that Jesus is our peace. He calls us to rest in His peace saying, "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest."

Jesus calls us to Himself that He would take away the burden of sin that weighs us down, causes us anxiety and makes us worry. He does this first, by assuring us of God's love. Whether we consciously acknowledge it or not, we all worry about God's attitude towards us. We always think we have to do something to earn God's favour. We are afraid we haven't done enough good to earn His favour. We fear we have done too much wrong to get into His good books. Jesus assures us that God loves us and we are in His good books for the sake of Him and the favour of forgiveness He earned for us through the blood of His cross. He calls us to Himself that we may rest in the peace of His cross through which He reconciled us to the heavenly Father in the forgiveness of sin! He calls to you and to me, saying, "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest."

Jesus gives us rest through the remembrance of our baptism, in which He promised us forgiveness as an ever flowing fountain of grace. If you ever worry how God feels about you, remember His promise in your baptism. He loves you! He forgives you! He gave the Holy Spirit to dwell within you! Jesus gives us forgiveness, faith and the Holy Spirit, also in the sacrament of Holy Communion, in which we receive His body and blood under the forms of bread and wine. Do you want rest and peace? Don't wait until there is a stone over your head that says "Rest in Peace." Come now to Jesus! Come to the waters of baptism. Come to the banquet of the Lord's Supper; it is given for our rest, refreshment and peace. Come to Jesus in the scriptures. He has the words of peace and eternal life. Listen to Jesus speak in the scriptures. He speaks words of encouragement, hope and peace. We take our place with Mary at the feet of Jesus and listen to His words that we may have rest in His peace.

At the beginning of this section, Matthew said Jesus went throughout the cities and villages of Israel proclaiming the good news of the righteous reign of God. Matthew said, when Jesus "saw the crowds, He had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." Jesus is the shepherd of our souls. He knows the things that harass us, threaten us and make us feel helpless. He is our helper and protector!

Jesus has compassion for us! He knows the sins and fears that keep us awake at night. Jesus loves us. He laboured for our salvation that He might bless us with His love in forgiveness. He lifts the burden of sin from our souls and the weight of guilt from our hearts. Jesus calls us to Himself so that we would have hope in our future, strength to fulfill our tasks in time, experience meaning in life and receive the fullness of life in eternity. He calls to you, "Come to me and I will give you rest." Come to Him! He is faithful to keep His promise and He will do it! In His Name. Amen