

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, July 5, 2020

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

Rest for Your Souls

Matthew 11:25–30

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

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”** (v 28).

1.

Rest.

It’s such a pleasant little word, isn’t it? It even has a nice ring to it, a soothing sound. There’s a quiet, calm, peaceful way about it: *Rest*. Like gentle waves lapping the beach. Like a light breeze through leaves or falling rain. Like the monotonous hum of a fan at night. Rest.

There’s nothing I want more than rest, and nothing that’s quite so hard to find. But even when I talk about wanting to rest or relax, I say it as if rest were another thing for me to do, another project to check off my list. But rest doesn’t work like that. The harder you try to rest, the less rest you have. The more you try to hold on to it, the quicker it slips through your fingers. Rest is a gift, not an achievement.

2.

Now what I’m after isn’t just rest from a busy household, or from the responsibilities of work, or from the needs and expectations of other people. If that’s all I wanted, then an early bedtime, a retreat, a vacation, or even a long walk might be enough. That kind of rest is fine, but a trip to the ocean—as enjoyable as that can be—isn’t enough, not when there are little ones to watch, coronavirus restrictions to observe, the battle with traffic there and back, and the lingering sunburn. All that can make it pretty stressful!

No, what I’m really looking for is something that’s so much harder to find. It’s rest from myself. I want a break from me. I want to get away from my worries and fears, from my temptations and distractions, from my sin, guilt, and shame. What I want is relief from the tension and stress of being coiled in on myself. What about you?

That's what St. Paul said about himself in Romans 7. He wrote it after he was baptized and became a Christian, not before. He says, **"For I don't understand my own actions. For I don't do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."** Preach it, brother, that's my life, too. **"Now if I do what I don't want, I agree with the law, that it's good. So now it's no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh, for I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out."** You can say that again. **"For I don't do the good I want, but the evil I don't want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I don't want, it's no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me"** (Rom 7:15–20), and how can I get rid of that? Where can I find *that* kind of rest—rest not just for the body but for the soul? Rest from the sin the dwells within me, rest from the sin that's killing me and those I love? Oh, what a mess I am. **Who will deliver me from this body of death** (Rom 7:25)?

3.

I'm sure you've heard the proverb that there's no rest for the weary. Have you ever felt that way? Do you feel that way now? Stretched to the limit with no relief. Loaded with burdens you can never put down. Forced to continue no matter how tired or over-worked you may feel. So you keep going through the motions each day while discouragement and despair pound at the door. It's different then the exhaustion that follows a hard day's work and a job well done. What I'm talking about is the exhaustion of work that's *never* done.

To be honest, that sounds like hell, doesn't it? A place without rest. No Sabbath. So different than the Garden of Eden—a place of perpetual rest. Sure, Adam and Eve had work to do there. Animals needed naming. The garden needed tending. They were to exercise dominion and care over God's good creation. But even that was restful for them. All that was done within the rest of God's blessing of them and His gifts to them. The fall into sin changed all that. It brought curses: pain, sweat, struggle in work, people turned against one another—husbands against wives and wives against husbands, parents against children and children against parents—and all of us against God.

Perhaps that's why we also say that there's no rest for the wicked. The prophet Isaiah the Lord says: **"There is no peace for the wicked"** (Is 48:22). And **"the wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up mud and dirt"** (Is 57:20). The devil wants it to be like this. He will never allow his followers to rest from their evil works. And if he has his way, he'll never let us find rest from the sin the dwells within us or the death that follows. He would keep our sin ever before us, right in front of your face.

4.

Earlier I said that rest is a gift, not an achievement. Yet that's not entirely true. Rest for the soul is never *our* achievement, but there is Someone who works to give you and me rest. Someone who comes **righteous and having salvation** for you. Someone who is meek and **humble** of heart (Zech 9:9). **A bruised reed He will not break, and a faintly burning wick He will not quench; He will faithfully bring forth justice** (Is 42:3).

Jesus came and shouldered the sin of the world. He put on the body of death. If we're so weary and burdened with our own sin, can you imagine what it was like for Him to carry the sin of the world on His back, the sin of all of us? And not only to carry that sin but to bear the full weight—the wrath, the punishment, the hell. What rest did He have? In His ministry, He brought rest to the sick and the sorrowing, to the weary and burdened, but He Himself had no rest. Jesus said, **"Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head"** (Matt 8:20). He was constantly pressed by the people and hounded by enemies. He suffered terribly. He was crucified for my sins. And then—finally—the sweet rest: **"Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit"** (Lk 23:46). **"It is finished"** (Jn 19:30). And Joseph of Arimathea **took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock** (Mt 27:60). And our Lord rested in the tomb—from all His work, from the work of paying for my sin and yours.

JESUS LABORED AND WAS HEAVY LADEN
SO THAT WE WOULD REST IN HIM.

5.

Rest.

Ah, what a pleasant little word. It's got a nice ring to it, a soothing sound. *Rest*. Like Jesus in the tomb, His agony, cross, and passion over, His hard work of carrying my sin and dying my death all finished. Like the baptismal ocean that buried the old me with Jesus and now brings newness of life each day. Like the Wind of heaven, clean and clear, on whose breath my sins are forgiven. Like the steady hum of Christ, who, week after week, keeps repeating: "Given and shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins."

Jesus isn't asking you to do anything. He isn't putting any demands on you. He's dragging our weary, sin-sick, dying bodies into His rest. Pulling us with Him, like a strong ox yoked to a dying one. Pulling us into life.

I'm reminded of the last sermon preached by Martin Luther. It was on this text. He proclaimed these words of Jesus, and then Martin did as he was told. Being weary, he went to Him who says, "**Come to Me.**"

If you're at all like me or Martin—and I suspect you are—that's what you've been looking for, too. "**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**" (v 28). And there you have it. Rest. In Jesus and His word. Rest now, and the promised, eternal rest still to come.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
