

Rest for your souls

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

For every great summer vacation that we savor for years afterwards, there are probably just as many vacation fails, the ones where everything seemed to go wrong: the cars that break down on the highway, the child who gets the flu on day one of a beach week, the restorative hike through the woods that results in a broken ankle. It's those vacations that are so restful that all you want to do is get back to work and experience some normal stress for a change.

These remind us that just as "time off" is not the same thing as *sabbath*, vacation is not the same thing as the deep, restorative rest that we find in God. We need all these things...we need time off and we need vacation, but we also need *sabbath*, we also need to let go the things that we are carrying, and rest in Jesus. We need to play, to be like children again, we need to uncover what recreation means. I used to hear *recreation* as a formal word for leisure, for those things we do when we're simply not working. But the word of course means re-creation, to create anew, to be filled with the energy and inspiration of new life. That is what happens when we can put down our burdens and find that perfect rest in Jesus.

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. You will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

The truth is, we are all carrying burdens. Some of us are carrying terrible burdens, and the worst are the ones we feel we can't speak of. Actually, the worst ones are the ones that weigh us down but are so cleverly disguised that we don't see them for what they are at all. That's why naming our burdens can be the most powerful agent of healing and grace that we can know.

What weighs on you today? Is it the suffering of a loved one...or your own struggle with self-destructive behavior? Is it a toxic work environment, or a stack of unpaid bills? Is it the sadness of seeing so many suffer needlessly, the grief of loss or loneliness, or simply feelings of unworthiness or shame?

In his writings, Lancelot Andrewes (a 16th-century priest with pretty much the best English name ever) pointed towards the goal of the Christian life as the *interiorization of the revealed Christian mystery*^j. He didn't mean it in the nice frozen-chosen way that we might think. If the mystery of Christ finds its way to

the heart of our being, that means we're going to be *more* joyful, *more* effusive in our love for God, more playful, more able, quite frankly, to let it all go come the sabbath day and rest completely in Christ. This is the heart of re-creation.

But we can also think of this beautiful interiorization of Christ's love as the perfect and complete release of the burdens we carry. Restfulness in God is the opposite of the weariness that comes from carrying those impossible loads. Some of those things, of course, are external, the systems where you can't get ahead, the troubled family member, the brokenness of a community.

But many burdens are effective because we've internalized them, made them our own, and are working on fooling others into carrying them with us. Those are the feelings of guilt and shame. But those can also be feelings of superiority and judgment – ego and pride are burdens too. As one very tender example, we can look at something like bigotry not just as a sin, but as a burden as well.

But which of these burdens – the ones that are external, the ones that we've internalized, the ones I have named and the many burdens that I haven't – came into the world with us when we were born? The answer I'm looking for here is, none of them. Not a single one. To quote John Donahue, *we don't come into this great world carrying a whole basket of burdens.*ⁱⁱ That is the miracle of birth, and one of the reasons we're so drawn to a child in the first months of her life. Who wouldn't want to hold a baby and be reminded of the moment when we, too, were without the heaviness and the weariness of our lives?

But we must do some work before we can get to the recreation. Perhaps the first task is to see the burdens for what they are, and then with an open heart and a critical mind begin to practice a bit of burden management. Think like a gatekeeper. When your cousin drops that little racist joke, when someone says something to hurt you or to bait you, or simply to diminish you, you don't have to be defensive or judgmental. You can simply realize that that's someone else's burden. You can say: *that's yours, I don't want, you can keep it. I'll be praying for you.*

But when Jesus says, *come to me and I will give you rest*, he isn't talking about coming for a day at the spa, either. He says that *my yoke is easy and my burden is light*. Easy and light, but you may notice that it is still a yoke, it is still a burden. That's because this perfect rest and refreshment is a part of discipleship, not just of letting go but of aligning our whole lives with the life and message of Jesus. Discipleship demands a lot of us, for it means giving our whole selves – all we are, and all we have – to God.

But there's something very different about *that* burden, isn't there?

I think of it as the difference between a burden that is oppressive and grinding, and one that is productive. Imagine a yoke that is so heavy that it destroys the bodies of one animal after the next. That is exploitative, and that's how we experience so many of the things that weigh us down. We're not growing, we're being used up. That's what a grinding burden looks like, and when we carry enough of those we forget entirely how to rest in God, or how to rest at all. The off switch stops working.

But the field still has to be worked, right? And that's what I mean by a productive burden, that by carrying Jesus as we go, living by his gentleness and humility, aligning our lives with his love for the world, we're still working, maybe even harder than before, but our souls are being restored. Our souls rest when the work we do is good, and meaningful, and life-giving. Our souls rest when we know we are with Jesus. This is when we experience re-creation.

Come to me, all you that are weary, and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. We carry terrible burdens. Instead of unloading, we learn to get better at carrying them (or so we think), which means that we just keep adding to the load until we finally collapse under the weight of it all. That's when we break down and realize that we need help.

Thank God there's another way, and it comes not from figuring it all out but in simply coming to Jesus, resting there with him, and reimagining the work of our lives. That's when we see just how much our souls need rest. Our souls need the rest and restoration that comes from reconnecting to God. We find that rest that in Jesus, in humility and gentleness, in the prayerful (and playful) work of re-creation.

Homily for July 9, 2017, The Rev. Bernard J. Owens, Year A, Proper 9, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Greensboro, North Carolina.

ⁱ A.M. Allchin, *Anglican Spirituality*, Stephen Sykes, John Booty & Jonathan Knight, Eds., *The Study of Anglicanism*, (London: Fortress Press, 1988). 355.

ⁱⁱ O'Donohue, *The Invisible World: Wisdom from the Celtic World*. Audiobook, published by Sounds True. Chapter 3.