

## EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JULY 18, 2021

JEREMIAH 23:1-6 | PSALM 23 | EPHESIANS 2:11-22 | MARK 6:30-34, 53-56

There are certain parts of Jesus's teaching that we know and love. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. I am the way the truth and the life. Blessed are the peacemakers.*

There are some words of Jesus that are more difficult. *If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. Forgive seventy times seven.*

And there are some words of Jesus that sound nice but are actually pretty challenging. Look no further than the first half of today's gospel reading *Come away with me and rest for a while.*

Those words are directed toward the disciples who have just returned from healing the sick, casting out demons, and proclaiming the kingdom of God. It's been a fulfilling but intense time. They could certainly use a little breather. And so could we.

But it's easier said than done. Because as soon as you start resting, you start wondering, *Shouldn't I be doing something more productive? Am I maximizing my potential here?* When we do talk about rest, we tend to justify it in terms of our productivity in the past (*You've earned it.*) or our productivity in the future (*I need to recharge my batteries.*). And this isn't just about productivity at work but in all areas of our lives where we live out our vocations. Family, friendships, civic life, and all the rest.

Think for a minute about those awkward catch-up chats we're having more of these days. You see someone you haven't seen in a year and change and ask how they're doing, and ninety percent of the time they respond with *I'm so busy*. It's tacky to talk about how much money you make or how big your house is. But busyness is a completely acceptable form of social currency.<sup>1</sup> And when I tell someone that I'm super busy, I'm not saying that I have a tight schedule sometimes (which is true) or that I'm not great at planning ahead (which is more true). What I'm saying is that I am an important person who other people need. Busyness gives us a sense that we are worthwhile, lovable, and important people.

That's why rest is so difficult for many of us. Because there's no voice from outside telling us that we're needed and necessary and important and valuable. Because it's tempting to construct our identities from a belief that we are productive and necessary and to spend our lives trying to get others to just reflect that back to us.

That might put *Come away with me and rest* in a new context. Why do you need to rest? Not because you need to recharge for the next mission. And not just because you've earned it. You need to rest because if you don't get away from being told you're needed and being told you're important and being told you're the only person holding things together, you're going to build your identity around that. You're going to think that your productivity is the thing that makes you valuable.

A few years ago, the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann wrote a book called *Sabbath as Resistance* which framed the keeping of Sabbath as a form of protest against consumerism and endless striving.<sup>2</sup> That in the same way that we divest from companies that profit from violence or pollution, we divest from practices that prevent us from being fully human.

But rest isn't simply a protest we engage in to make a point. It is, his words, an alternative worldview and identity for us to inhabit. And, his words, the "alternative on offer is the awareness and practice of the claim that we are situated on the receiving end of the gifts of God."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Transcript: Ezra Klein Interviews Agnes Callard - The New York Times," accessed July 14, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/14/podcasts/ezra-klein-podcast-agnes-callard-transcript.html>.

<sup>2</sup> There's an obvious critique here about who has the power and wealth to rest. The counterpoint is that rest shouldn't be a privilege or something only some people have access to.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), xiv.

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Our culture of endless striving and maximizing creates good consumers and good workers and good students and good parents. What it doesn't create are good receivers of God's gifts. And it's easy to see why. Our cultural myth is that you shouldn't be on the receiving end. You should be a maker, not a taker. A job creator, not a public charge. To be reliant on anyone other than yourself is seen as a moral failure. No wonder our public life is marked by so much resentment and skepticism.<sup>4</sup>

Rest in general and sabbath in particular are ways of creating space for God to get to us and for us to become aware of the giftedness of life. It is a way of creating a different sort of economy and system of value where life is something we receive, not something we construct.

That's actually what ties today's two gospel readings together. You may have noticed that our gospel reading jumps twenty (!) verses from this scene of rest to more of Jesus's healings. These seem to have nothing in common. The disciples rest. Also, Jesus heals people.

But look at where Jesus heals people. "And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces." "Marketplace" here comes from the Greek word *agora*. It's the center of town. It's the place where people wheel and deal. It's the place where people show off their wealth and status. It's the place where people flaunt their religious connections and political acumen. It is a place for what kind of people? People who are productive. People who are connected. People who are moving up in the world.

Until Jesus shows up. And suddenly Jesus starts bringing in people who aren't productive. Who aren't good workers. Who aren't seen as valuable. Jesus doesn't simply heal the sick when he's hidden away on the outskirts of town. No, Jesus disrupts our own systems of value and order and status. And he brings in all kinds of people. In a world that only wants people to buy and consume and maximize and network, Jesus wants people to receive. Jesus creates space for God to get at people.

And so it is at table. That in a world where everything is a commodity, everyone is a competitor, and every minute can be monetized, Jesus says that there is an alternative. A space where the flourishing of others benefits us all. A time where there is nothing more important to be doing. A place in the midst of our gated communities and private clubs and exclusive neighborhoods where strangers are welcomed.

Jesus comes right into the middle of our striving for status and power and influence, and creates space for God to get at us. Not simply to consume but to receive. No credentials. No titles. No degrees. No applications. Nothing other than a pair of empty hands.

Come away and rest. Come, take, and eat.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>4</sup> Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (Random House Publishing Group, 2021).