

## “CATCH YOUR BREATH”

Matthew 11:25-30

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### Introduction to the Scripture

Our lectionary passage today consists of two distinct parts. In the first part, verses 25-27, Jesus is speaking out of personal experience. He has noticed that many wise people rejected him and many simple, humble people accepted him. It is not so much that Jesus was against wisdom, but there is a kind of intellectual pride that often blocks a person from hearing and receiving his message. Jesus concludes this first section by making the bold claim that anyone who is humble enough to listen to his words will come to know God.

In the second part of this passage we have the familiar words of Jesus, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” I will focus upon these words that also provide a good lead into our communion service.

Let us hear God’s Word in Matthew 11:25-30:

At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

M—This is the Word of the Lord.

P – Thanks be to God.

A distinguished professor at Harvard University was asked at the time of his retirement, “As you look back at all your years at Harvard what one thing do you miss the most?” His answer was, “The vacations.”

Perhaps today you have vacations on your mind, too. We are in the midst of the Fourth of July weekend when many people are already away on vacation. You may have plans for a vacation sometime later this summer. Most of us lead

active, even hectic, lives. We need a change of pace, a time when we can simply “catch our breath” again.

On Friday, June 20, tournament history was made in the Hudson Junior Golf Invitational, but not in the manner that many anticipated. Eli Jurea, 14, of Austin, Texas, became the youngest boy’s champion in the 30-year history of the event by shooting a 76 in the final round, giving him a 3-shot victory at the Country Club of Hudson.

Jurea is not nationally ranked, as were some of the players. I was especially interested in what he said when he was asked about his winning technique. He replied, “I take deep breaths between the shots. I don’t think about the tournament at all... About 30 seconds before the shot, I will focus on it and nothing else.”

“I take deep breaths...” That is something that is not only effective in shooting golf but is useful in other sports, too. In fact, it is a good way of overcoming stress in our lives. Therefore, if you pay close attention to the scripture you will learn how “to catch your breath.”

What did Jesus mean by his words, “Take my yoke upon you... and my yoke is easy?”

In the Hebrew tradition the term “yoke” was used to refer to being submissive to the law and its commandments. When Jesus said, “My yoke is easy” he probably means “My yoke is well-fitting.” The original Greek word can have this meaning. In other words, Jesus is saying just as a yoke is tailor-made to fit the oxen, so the life he offers is not a burden to gall us, but is made to measure to fit us. As William Barclay comments: “God has a task for every one of us, which is made to measure for us.”

The “burdens” Jesus refers to in the immediate context undoubtedly refer to the numerous laws the scribes and Pharisees had added to the original Law of Moses. Trying to keep hundreds of laws on every minute detail of living was indeed burdensome. Jesus contrasts this way of life with the way of grace and freedom. That is why he says, “My burden is light.”

From time to time I read other translations of the Bible. A favorite of mine is Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*. This is the way he translates Matthew 11:28-30:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out?...  
Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover  
your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest.  
Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it.  
Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.”

If we would follow Jesus around for a while and seek to learn from him what are we apt to hear him say?

#### TAKE A NAP

One thing we might hear Jesus say is “take a nap.”

Can you think of any activity more universally panned than napping? In the workplace we hear plenty of people boasting about how early they rose, how late they stayed up, how many days it has been since they have “really slept.” But when was the last time you heard anyone brag about the “great nap” he or she caught yesterday afternoon?

We tend to equate sleep with sloughing off. A siesta is an automatic admission that one is weak, overworked, or overwhelmed. If you are asleep you can’t answer e-mail, you can’t respond to faxes, and you can’t split screen projecting stock quotes, news headlines, and office memos all at the same time.

Jesus took a nap from time to time. Remember that dramatic story in Mark 4:35-41 when Jesus was with his disciples in a small boat sailing on the Sea of Galilee? Suddenly a storm appeared out of nowhere. The disciples were frightened. But where was Jesus? He was taking a nap. Finally, they awakened him, “Don’t you care if we drown?” Jesus was equal to the occasion and calmed the sea and everyone in the boat.

Let’s admit it. We are not too busy to take a nap. We are too scared. We cannot close our eyes because we cannot bear to relinquish the little bit of control we have convinced ourselves we hold. We are fearful that in an unguarded moment we will lose all the reins of power we have so tightly grasped.

#### GO TAKE A HIKE.

If we follow Jesus around long enough we might also hear him say, “Go take a hike.”

When Jesus felt the strain, when he was drained and exhausted from his teaching and healing ministry, he often said to his disciples, “We’re out of here.” Or, I think the scripture puts it: “Let us go over to the other side.” (Mark 4:35) When the crowds pressed around Jesus on one side of the lake, he announced to his disciples that they were going to other side of the lake, away from the crowds to rest, for a change of pace, for downtime.

How we need to do the same. When we have hit “the wall” and cannot go any farther it is time to take a hike – walk, stroll, saunter, ride a bike. The best way to

change your mood is to take a walk. Even a ten-minute walk will help, a longer walk is better.

In recent months I have personally enjoyed meeting so many people who tell me what walking means to them. Some people walk for physical fitness, or mental renewal, or even for spiritual rejuvenation. Others walk in groups to support worthy causes, such as "Relay for Life," or to raise money to cure juvenile diabetes, among other worthy causes.

I shared this story with some of our members who attend the Congregational Conversations at Laurel Lake. A short time ago one of my friends gave me a copy of the January issue of *Fortune* magazine. In it I found an article about Melinda Gates, the wife of Bill Gates. It seems that she exercises five days a week. She has competed in the Seattle marathon. She is a mountain climber who has climbed to the peak of Mount Rainier, some 14,410 feet high.

What especially struck me in reading the article was the way she and Bill went about evaluating requests for monies from their foundation. They currently have 37 billion dollars in their foundation. They have members of the foundations who decide who receives the money that is requested, but if the request is for 40 million dollars or more Bill and Melinda personally evaluate that request. And how do they do it? Melinda says that they go for a long walk and in the process make their decisions.

Melinda said when Warren Buffet recently gave their foundation 3 billion dollars and promised to give his whole estate worth more than 41 billion dollars to them to invest, she said they went on a long walk and both cried. She recalls, "We said to each other, "My gosh, do you know how responsible we're going to feel giving someone else's money away?"

You can't say that you have not received anything practical from the message today. Now you know how to make sound choices when you are faced with giving your billions of dollars away! You do it by taking a slow, long distance walk. Of course, I suppose this advice is applicable whether you are giving away millions or only thousands of dollars.

Have you ever thought about how much of the action in the Bible takes place outside in the natural world? Wendell Berry, the Kentucky farmer-poet once wrote: "I don't think it is enough appreciated how much an outdoor book the Bible is." I believe he is right. The Bible is, to use Henry Thoreau's words, "a book open to the sky."

Maybe the Bible is best read and understood outdoors. Some passages of scripture read indoors seem improbable or incredible; outdoors they seem

natural. Could that be so because outdoors we are confronted everywhere with wonders? We see that the miraculous is not extraordinary but the common mode of existence.

Movie star Robert Redford once said, "Other people have analysts. I have Utah." When life becomes too stressful for him, he returns to his ranch in Utah.

TAKE A HALT.

Then too, if we follow Jesus around long enough to learn his secret of rest, we are apt to hear him say one day, "Take a halt," stop completely.

It was said of Jesus that on the Sabbath Day, he entered the synagogue "as was his custom." Apparently, going to the synagogue was not just an occasional happening for Jesus but a regular occurrence. He entered the synagogue to pray and hear the Word of God proclaimed. He and his disciples stopped what they were doing. They called a halt from their normal routine and engaged in a Sabbath rest.

It was as if Jesus was saying when the Sabbath day came, "I am done. Whatever is done is done. Now I stop. My work does not rule me; I rule my work. I can take a break. I want to catch my breath.

Sabbath rest is when we imitate God by stopping our work and resting. The fourth commandment reminds us: "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall do no work... For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day." (Exodus 20:8-11)

God took a break, like an artist stepping back from her easel and admiring her painting. God took a breather, like a weary factory laborer stepping out for some fresh air.

I have always admired the painting by Millet simply called "The Angelus." He pictures a peasant couple bowing in prayer. They had just heard the Angelus bells ringing from the church bell tower in the village. They have stopped their work in the field. They pause for a moment of silent prayer to reconnect their lives to God. The strain and bitterness leave their souls, and their troubles as well as their work are seen in a new light.

Through the years I have loved to hear the sound of bells. They remind me to cease what I am doing, and for a moment center my thoughts on God. When I hear our church bell ring five minutes before worship it reminds me it is stop time, it is "catch my breath" time; it is time to be grateful to God; it is time to

restore the rhythm of life between work and rest. We all seem to be better at working than resting. The Sabbath or Lord's Day helps me to experience the "unforced rhythms of grace."

CONCLUSION:

In our Communion service we sometimes remind ourselves that this is the joyful feast of the people of God. Men and women will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God.

An old spiritual from the American black community puts it this way:

"Plenty good room! Plenty good room!  
Plenty good room in my Father's kingdom;  
Plenty good room! Plenty good room!  
So choose your seat and sit down."

Today as we commune we are reminded once again there is "plenty good room" for us all.

Jesus said, "Are you tired" Worn out? Burned out...? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace." Amen.