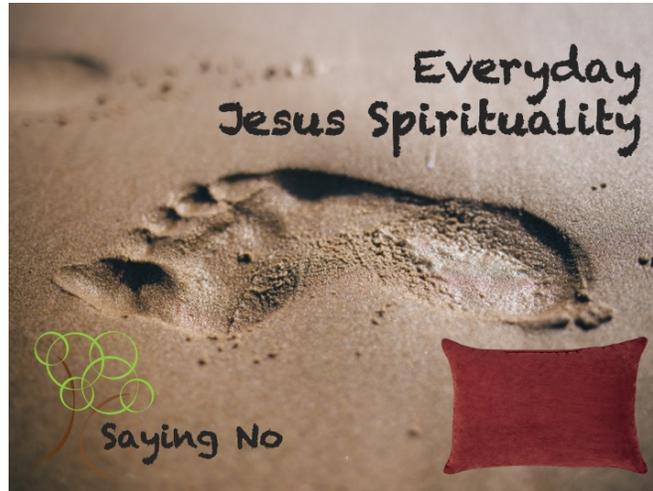


“Saying No”; Everyday Jesus Spirituality
Matthew 11:28-30 (Exodus 20/Deuteronomy 5)
Westside Fellowship CRC: 31 March 2019
Rev. Heidi S. De Jonge



I hadn't planned this, but there is something quite right about preaching a message on the spiritual discipline of purposeful work one week, and the spiritual discipline of Sabbath rest – and saying no to the relentless tyranny of the urgent – the next week. We need both work and rest. As Mark Buchanan writes in his book, *The Rest of God*, There are “some facets of God we glimpse only through motion... But other facets of God we discover only through stillness” (p. 49).

Last week we spoke highly of the discipline of purposeful work and motion. Henry David Thoreau said, “Be not simply good; be good for something.” Don't just stand there, do something! Don't just dig a hole and hide what God has given you; put what God has given you to use! There is a real value in being engaged and active! It is what is required of us. (*Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God.*)

But we can place too high a value on our activity... thinking that our value comes from our work or what we do. I read in one of the books I'm reading for this series this week (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Altar in the World*) that the Chinese have a way of greeting each other... The polite answer to the question, How are you? Is, I am very busy, thank you and how are you? Really? This is the measure of our fine-ness? That we are busy? Well, maybe they are just being really honest...

I also read this week that the Chinese pictograph symbol for the word busyness is the merging of two characters: the character for 'heart' and the character for 'killing.' (Buchanan, p. 49). (Though found another source that says this is a weird sanctimonious read... it means heart – perish/ disappear/lose/flee – so, okay...¹) There is some good honesty here as well... and truth. There is something that is just fine about being highly engaged. But there is something about it that can kill you. Maybe figuratively, maybe literally.

It's hard for me to admit that... that my lack of rest could kill me. It's hard for me to believe that my value is not ultimately tied to what I can produce. In her book, *Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor challenges us to “test the premise that you are worth more than what you can produce—that even if you spent one whole day being good for nothing you would still be precious in God’s sight—and when you get anxious because you are convinced that this is not so, remember that our own conviction is not required. [To rest from your labours] is a *commandment*. Your worth has already been established, even when you are not working. The purpose of the commandment is to woo you to the same truth” (p 139). Instead of “Don’t just stand there, do something!” maybe sometimes we should hear, “Don’t just do something, *stand there!*”

I don't think I'm saying anything you haven't heard before when I say that the fourth commandment – the commandment to keep the sabbath day holy - might be the only one that – when someone disobeys it – we actually commend them for it. Take God's name in vain? Gasp! Worship idols? No! Steal? Commit Adultery? Murder? Lie? Heaven forbid! Work for weeks straight without taking a day off? How do you do it?

The fourth commandment, in the Jewish community, refers to the Sabbath – from sundown on Friday evening to sundown on Saturday evening. We, as Christians, have shifted the celebration of our Sabbath to the Lord's Day, to Sunday. A day set aside. In the Jewish community, a traditional Jewish family will begin *Shabbat*, the Sabbath, by lighting two candles – apparently at the time that three stars are visible in the night sky... And the two candles represent the two articulations of the fourth commandment.

¹ http://www.pinyin.info/chinese/busyness_heart_killing.html

In Exodus 20, the commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy and free from work is rooted in the story of creation. We should rest on the Sabbath day because that's what God did. After six days of creating good things (and on the sixth day, the very good thing of a human being), God rested for one day... and that day wasn't good, that day was HOLY.

In Deuteronomy 5, the commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy and free from work is rooted in the story of the Israelite's liberation from Egypt. "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day."

So we rest from our work because God rested from God's work after creation... and we rest from our work to show and to celebrate that we are free – that God has liberated us... that we do not depend on our own work for our value, but on God's liberation... a liberation that rises out of his love.

There's one other difference to note in the two versions of this commandment. In Exodus, we are to *remember* the Sabbath day, and in Deuteronomy, we are to *observe* the Sabbath day. Jewish teachers – Rabbis – come up with stories and reasons for such things, and one rabbinical teaching is that these two words help us to divide the rest of our days. For the three days of the week following the Sabbath, we are to remember and reflect on the Sabbath past... and for the three days leading up to the next Sabbath, we are to observe the Sabbath – to look forward to it and anticipate it. Another way to put it is that the day of rest orders our time.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes about the Sabbath and our need for it in her chapter on the discipline of saying 'no.' Saying no. I think I preached a sermon during advent on the discipline of saying 'yes' – saying yes to things, like Mary did, before we even know what we're saying yes to. Giving our word to things that are beyond our capacity to fulfill... Taking risks with the gifts that we have been given – doing hard things.

But sometimes the hardest thing is saying, No. No, I am not going to give my time or energy to that. No, I am not going to give myself to this or that initiative. I am going to say 'no' and I trust that even though that might disappoint you, that my value does not come from what

I do for you, or how much I please you. I'm saying no, not to be a jerk, but to make or keep room in my life to spend my love in the ways God is calling me to.

I have a very difficult time with this. And I trust that I am not the only one in this room who struggles with this. And so, I need Matthew 11 – today and every day. I need to hear Jesus say to me – again – Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden... all you who frantically spin and labour in ways that show how much you depend on your own strength. Come to me, all you whose hearts are being killed by the same busyness that you wear as a badge. Come to me, all you who forget the Sabbath instead of remembering it... all who you ignore the Sabbath, instead of observing it and I. Will. Give. You. Rest.

Jesus doesn't just save us. Jesus *refreshes* us. "Not, 'I will save you' only,' Chrysostom wisely commented, 'but what is much greater, 'I will refresh you,' that is, I will set you in all quietness'. (Dale Bruner, *Matthew*, p. 538).

And Jesus doesn't just refresh us, Jesus equips us "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." Dale Bruner: "A yoke is a work instrument. Thus when Jesus offers a yoke he offers what we might think tired workers need least. They need a mattress or a vacation, not a yoke. But Jesus realizes that the most restful gift he can give the tired is a new way to carry life, a fresh way to bear responsibilities. For in the final analysis, realism sees that life is a succession of burdens; we cannot get away from them; thus instead of offering escape, Jesus offers equipment" (p. 538).

It's both the rest... and the work...



On Ash Wednesday, I said that we should be carrying two pieces of paper around in our pockets – one says, ‘You are a piece of dust’ and the other says, ‘The Whole world was made for you.’ We could do that with these disciplines from the last couple of weeks as well... Do not just be good, be good for something... and Even when you spend a whole day being good *for* nothing, you are valued and loved. In one pocket you could carry the piece of paper that says what my dad would always say to me, “All you can do is all you can do and all you can do is enough.” And another that says what my friend Chris said to me once, “And you can almost always do more than you think you can do.” In one pocket – Don’t just stand there, do something. In another, don’t just do something, stand there.

What stands in the centre of all these pockets – of all these pieces of paper – is Jesus... Who is both our rest and our yoke fellow... Who, with the Father and the Spirit, was present at creation – making us – and who is our Redeemer and liberates us. Jesus, who said ‘yes’ at just the right times and who said ‘no’ at just the right times.

He said Yes to being baptized in the Jordan by John, and then No to the devil in the wilderness. He said No to all those around him Mark 6 so that he could have the disciples come away and rest in a while, and he said Yes to the centurion who asked him to come and heal his servant. He said No to the Pharisees who were tying up heavy burdens and placing them on people, but Yes to the Pharisee, Nicodemus, who came to him in the middle of the night to ask true questions. He said Yes, if it be your will to the cross and to death on it, but No to the everlasting power and curse of death and the grave and Yes to the resurrection...