



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

Sermon July 18, 2021 “Life Needs Rest” Rev. David Jones

People say that after a vacation you need a vacation, a chance to really rest and do nothing at all after the busyness of travel and a family reunion, or the excitement of some new city or place. I imagine many of you have recently had the experience that Caity and I just had, seeing family after a much longer time than we would normally go without seeing family. There was added pressure to get the visit just right, to make sure we had every meal we’ve been dreaming of, play every game, see every cherished place; to eat fried shrimp and hush puppies, to play parcheesi, to see St. Augustine, the city where Caity and I were married. And admittedly, after driving a 15 foot U-Haul from Jacksonville to Shelburne Falls with some new furniture we were lucky enough to get from Caity’s parents, I was ready for another week off. But after a night or two of good sleep back at home, I started to realize how rested and energetic I felt. How prepared I was to get back to work. With some time and space from the long drive home, I can look back and see all the rest we enjoyed on the beach, around the dinner table, on city rooftops or by the river at sunset.

And so it was funny to turn my attention to worship on Friday and Saturday and to find these scriptures in the lectionary. After such a long time away, restored with rest, it was interesting to read Psalm 23 and hear it so differently than I have before. Psalm 23 is the Psalm that is requested most at the bedside in hospitals, it is the reassuring and life-giving Psalm most often read for families that are in grief at the graveside. But this week I read it with well rested eyes and I heard less reassurance, less consoling, and more unbridled joy. I heard that God seeks to guide us into rest and hurries to comfort us not just in difficult hours or in times of distress but always, constantly--that rest and feeling comfortable all the days of our lives is what God imagines and hopes for us all, that the house of the Lord we dwell in is furnished and complete, it is tranquil and beautiful now; the green pastures and still blue waters are already here.

‘Rest’ is not synonymous with the Sabbath, but as I read this Psalm not in distress but at ease, it occurred to me that there is no *eighth* day; the process of Creation reaches its end in God’s own rest on the seventh day. Rest, leisure, peace--these are the end or the fulfillment of Creation. And so rest is the end or fulfillment of what we are seeking as people of faith. Like Julian of Norwich has said, “God is Very Rest;” rest is the divine presence *after* the six days of Creation are complete. After all the upheaval, all the tumult and churning of this cosmic creation--in God’s resting--we can now have Life. And in that life, when we are at rest--genuinely at rest--we are in communion with our Creator that is also resting. In our rest we gain this radical equality with the Creator.

But there is a terrible confusion about this that stalks us. We have somehow, as a society, lost faith. Now we imagine that rest is some kind of self-care, some kind of individual survival tactic. I do this too, I take a break when I really *need* it so that I can keep doing my job. Rest becomes only another tool in our tool kit to keep us working. Instead of working to rest, we reluctantly rest to keep working. Instead of the seventh day or the Sabbath being our fulfillment, our very purpose, our very communion with God and all created things, our rest is really more like a short break we take in the middle of our days. Rest in our society today is a 10 minute break sandwiched between hours of hard labor or high stress, the thing we tolerate to press on to the next task or the next worry. In our country we talk about believing in this God whose creative work was to achieve the divine rest, where God is no longer alone but surrounded by others, where God is real now in the wind and trees and pastures and still waters, in God’s children and in

each of our relationships and especially and most of all in our love and compassion; in our country we talk about believing in this God, but here we are ignoring this purpose and replacing it with our own. The rest we take in our society today is fleeting even if it is still practical. It is helpful in continuing to work. But it could be so much more.

I think this is why as I was becoming religious I was drawn to the labor movement that once struggled and won the right to an eight hour work day and a weekend, that even now fights for vacation time and sick days. This is a movement that seems to have preserved or happened onto the purpose that our faith preserves in the Sabbath and our story of Creation. Of course there is work to be done--making God real, making love real, providing our daily bread, involves a lot of work. But we should do this work to gather by the still waters, to lay down in the green pastures. The faithful idea of work--the idea of work under this God we read about in scripture--is the idea of work that *ends*, that can be finished. And not just in retirement, but every week. The *week-end* is what the labor movement once fought for. At the end of all this work and struggle should be rest and peace, a long moment when all things can live and be together in the one house of the Lord, by the pastures and waters of God's Creation.

If my well rested eyes had me hearing the Psalm differently, it also found me struggling a little bit with the Gospel. Our reading from Mark begins with much the same conviction of the Psalmist, that all our work should come to an end in rest and leisure. The apostles had been busy and as they reported their work to their teacher, Jesus urged them to take their much deserved rest. After all, this is the whole point of their teaching, that God is with us, that God wants the best for us all, that God draws near when we suffer and have difficulties--that God loves us and God especially loves those who feel unloved, who are mistreated or oppressed. The whole point of this religious school that Jesus and his apostles are advancing is to set the peasants and tradespeople of 1st century Palestine free from the economic exploitation and national oppression they are experiencing under Roman occupation; the point is to reconcile the middling agents like tax collectors of this oppressive system with the people they have been victimizing, to bring about things like debt forgiveness that can free a stratified people from their inequality and lack of kinship. And all of this must be done if the Creation is to be fulfilled, if all of God's children are to experience the relaxation and gentleness of leisure, the peacefulness of rest, that each successive day of the Creation is building toward. As teachers and workers of this message, it is time for them to experience the divine rest their faith has uncovered.

But, then the Gospel brings us back to earth. Even though these wonderful and generous apostles have worked as hard as they have, even though they have borne the purpose of Creation in mind--even though they deserve to rest and are due rest--the world around them is still confused. Much like our world today, it is far easier to say we should rest than it is to actually rest. And sure enough, the concerns of the world follow them even to a deserted place. Jesus springs into action and responds to the people of this world who have followed them, who have not let them rest just yet. In verses that are not included in the lectionary Jesus will feed the masses of people who have pursued them and blocked their rest. And then, he will heal them, all who reach out and touch him.

So yes, we should all take our rest, through it we all gain the true life of lying down in green pastures and standing by still waters. But--and I think this *is* good news for those of us who are weary, who must work long hours, who cannot take even a short break, who work more than one job or find ourselves anxious and distressed or at dis-ease from painful or discomfoting illness, who never have relief from financial worries, who everyday feel like they are barely hanging on--God has made it a condition of the Creation's fulfillment, the nature of divine or true rest, that we all will rest together or we will have to keep working together.

You see, many of us just like the apostles *deserve* rest. God invites us *all* to rest. But if we take that rest as private individuals or only as a small group, and fail to achieve that rest for all God's children--if we leave our siblings behind or turn our back on our neighbors or co-workers--then the world's concerns and troubles will follow us to every deserted place.

All life needs rest. But God's Creation will not be fulfilled until all life *gets* to rest. God's love and justice will appear as struggle, as churning not still waters, until all of us have a *week-end*, until all of us

have vacation time, until all of us have sick days, until we throw off the yoke of our confusion, and remember that we were not created for work but for rest. With this faith, with God, one shining day we shall not want, and wherever we go, into villages or cities or farms, goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our life.

Alleluia and amen.