

How Can Respite and Refreshment Restore Us?

Friends, longer-time and newer, we are gathered here on a mid-summer morning with land that has been relationship with people for millennia. As we move into the part of our worship when we invite today's Scripture readings to illuminate our lives (nudging us in both challenging and encouraging ways), let us first pause to pray. Spirit of God, Love that is greater than fear, as we mediate on sacred texts from long ago, we trust you to breathe a fresh word into each of our lives and into the life of our congregation. Grant us courage to hold ourselves open to accepting your invitation into ways of respite, refreshment and restoration. Amen.

Friends in faith, today's scripture readings extend to us invitations that counter many of the invitations we receive through messages formed within dominant capitalistic culture. On a daily basis, we perceive invitations to strive for something – something bigger, newer, or somehow better than what we already have and are. Today, the Psalmist and Jesus call us to shift our attention to ways of refreshment and respite – so that we might experience restoration even in the midst of life's many and various storms.

Much like any skilled contemporary song writer, the Psalmist welcomed specific images, feelings and experiences to take on form through word and sound. As the images, feelings and experiences in a song live and breathe through words and sounds, they create a story to be shared by those who hear and sing them.

Two of our middle school youth (Zoey and Brayden) and I returned yesterday from Regional Youth Event in Rock Island, Illinois; where we heard and sang many spirit-provoking and affirming songs as a group of 130 youth and adults.

We explored the liberating message of our Christian faith through the theme, “Love is Greater than Fear.” Indeed, the specific images, feelings, and experiences shared with us by songwriters, vocalists and instrumentalists told stories of how our strong hearts, nimble minds, and beautiful bodies can channel love that is greater than the fear the fuels racism, ableism, transphobia, and so many other fear-based attitudes and actions.

As we move into wondering how respite and refreshment can restore us, let’s share some thoughts aloud with one another to prime the pump. We will begin this morning by coming alongside Jesus and his disciples, who were in need of respite. **I wonder: how does respite (a break, a reprieve) feel in your life? How does respite (a break, a reprieve) feel?**

[restorative, calming] Thank you for sharing those feelings.

Now, I wonder (and anticipate the first question conjured responses to this one): what does respite look like in your life? What are the spaces or ways in which you take a break or a reprieve, an intentional interruption of your normal patterns? What does respite look like in your life? *[a nap, worship together in community, a turned-off cell phone, playing my piano, two Adirondack chairs under a tree in my field with dogs lying in front of me in the breeze, a walk, riding my bicycle, curled up in my library with a book, sitting on the couch with the grandkids when they all listen at one time]* There are many ways of respite.

We heard Sharri read this opening to today’s gospel reading: *“The apostles came back to Jesus and reported all that they had done and taught. Jesus said to them, ‘Come away by yourselves to someplace more remote, and rest awhile.’*

For there were many people coming and going, and the apostles hadn't had time to eat. So they went away in a boat to a deserted area."

Jesus straightforwardly encouraged his companions to take respite. Can you see, though, the appreciative gleam in Jesus' eye as he listened to them passionately recount their adventures in ministry – visiting with people, exploring sacred texts together, collaborating toward healing. He loved his friends so much. He trusted them and delighted in the ways they were growing in faith and courage. AND, in addition to affirming their life work, he wanted respite for them. But...

Then we heard, "The people saw them leaving and many recognized them, so they ran together on foot from all the cities and got there ahead of the apostles. When Jesus went ashore, there was a large crowd waiting for him, and he felt compassion for them... So he began to teach them many things."

Can you relate to Jesus and his disciples in regard to how challenging it is to set limits and create boundaries that necessitate saying "no" to helping others. In this generation, we talk about compassion fatigue. Persons in caregiving professions; persons who act as caregivers for their children, aging parents, or relatives of any age and need; and, really, any persons (all of you included) who pour heart energy into your interactions with others can experience compassion fatigue. Too much energy is sometimes drained without restoration.

Insert here the story of the feeding of the 5,000, which my colleague Rev. Rebecca LeMenager will explore with you next Sunday. And... THEN... We heard, "...Jesus **made** the disciples get in the boat and go on ahead to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up to the hillside to pray."

Jesus showed the sheer importance of respite by not only urging his companions to find space and time away from the fray but further separating himself from them so that he could experience respite in the form of solitude. **I wonder, do we each find ways to practice solitude – companionship between yourself and the loving Spirit of God (full stop)?**

Once Jesus had benefited from time and space in solitude, we heard this beloved story: *“When evening came, the boat was far out on the lake, and Jesus was alone on land. **He saw that the disciples were worn out with rowing**, because the wind was against them. About three in the morning, Jesus went out to them, walking on the water. He was about to pass them by when they saw him and – thinking it was a ghost – cried out. For they had all seen him and were terrified. **Jesus hastened to reassure them: ‘Calm yourselves! It’s me. Don’t be afraid.’** Jesus got into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed by what had happened.”*

Too often, this story is reduced to its supernatural element, with fixation on how awesome it was that Jesus was remembered as walking on water. I don’t know... my parents barefoot skied, so I think some of us have seen walking on water. In fact, I remember an experience from when I was serving as a junior counselor at a summer camp at the age of 17. We were so intent on emphasizing the awesomeness of walking on the water in this story that we, lakeside in northern Wisconsin, hauled picnic tables into the lake (abutted to the pier) such that a slightly older counselor could walk off the pier onto the water as Jesus in an optical illusion. Perhaps it did have a profound effect on some of those children.

However, two other things that Jesus did amaze me in more powerful ways than walking across water. First there was this part: *“He saw that the disciples were worn out with rowing.”* I find Jesus looking at and perceiving people throughout the gospels. And that is what we need to do as a faith community – is to truly see each other (each other’s efforts, each other’s questions, each other’s painful experiences) – in order to notice what is going on (like these people were worn out). We need to notice each other in order to fully see and appreciate one another. That is a much more powerful miracle than walking on water.

Then, later, *“Jesus hastened to reassure them: ‘Calm yourselves! It’s me. Don’t be afraid.’* Jesus did not presume that he would be the one to calm them. He reminded them that they could calm themselves. One of the most powerful workshops I attended at this Regional Youth Event was one in which one of my colleagues harvested from thirty youth in the room many ways that they can care for themselves. The workshop was entitled *“Mental Health and Self Care.”* Our youth and all of us at any age experience so many difficult moments in our days. And yet we can care for ourselves, and that is the power of God working through us to love ourselves better. So Jesus reassuring them that they could find ways to calm themselves and not be afraid (even in that tumultuous moment) was a miracle.

Let’s move into the psalm and stay with it a moment today – a beloved, well-known psalm. I find that the Psalms have several movements as the lyricist unfolds their story.

We heard: *“You let me lie down in green meadows;
you lead me beside restful waters:
you refresh my soul.”*

Earlier, we heard some ways of finding respite (space and time away). I encourage us also to lean into ways we practice simple rest and recognize and appreciate how that refreshes us.

Then we heard, *“Even if I’m surrounded by the shadow of Death,
I fear no danger, for you are with me.
Your rod and your staff – they give me courage.”*

Thank God for those in our lives who have exemplified how to continue to love and how to continue to receive love even in the very shadow of Death. We know that we all come from two things (Love and the Earth) and that we will return to Love and to the Earth. Let us lean into the examples of those who show us courage even in the shadow of Death.

We also heard, *“You spread a table before me
in the presence of my enemies,
and you anoint my head with oil – my cup overflows!”*

Feeling anointed is knowing that God’s presence is always with us. So, I don’t know about you, but I sometimes tire of the near constant reminder to practice gratitude. Because sometimes we’re having a bad moment or a bad day and it’s difficult to be ceaselessly practicing gratitude. But we do find the moments when it rises up. And how much that does restore us (when we can recognize that for which we are grateful – such that we can even feel an overflowing cup)!

Finally, the psalm ends with these words: *“Only goodness and love will
follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in your house, God,
for days without end.”*

What if only goodness and love were to follow you? Because stink sometimes follows us when we hurt ourself or another. What if we were to become ever more perfected through the Love of God that eventually only goodness and love would follow us without end – from eternity to eternity.

May we follow these songs – the song of the psalmist and the life song of Jesus so that we may be restored in faith and courage as we say yes to experiences of respite and refreshment, because Love is counting on us. Amen.

July 21, 2024
St. Croix United Church @ People's Park
Psalm 23, Mark 6:30-34 & 45-51