

Lectionary 14 A 2020

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

July 5, 2020

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

I sometimes like to go for a walk early in the morning in the Rillito River Park. People sometimes use chalk to write messages on the asphalt pathway. Last week, there was a chalk question, “Would you like to know how to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ?” Those words were written out one by one in sequence as you walked over them. And it ended with a phone number you could call, a local phone number with a 520 area code. “Would you like to know how to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ?”

In our churches, we develop a personal relationship with Jesus Christ through Word and Sacrament. Word means the Bible, and the preaching of the Bible, which mediates our connection with Jesus. It forms and informs our relationship. And Sacrament means, essentially, baptism and communion. So if someone asks you if you know Jesus personally, if you have a personal relationship with Christ, you can answer that you have a relationship with Jesus Christ. But he’s not an imaginary friend, which may be what some people think a personal relationship with Jesus is like. You and I have a relationship to Jesus through Word and Sacrament.

The coronavirus pandemic has really played havoc with our ability to communally experience Word and Sacrament. Our congregation, like so many, has effectively been closed on Sunday mornings. Some of you have told me how you’ve come by to visit the memorial garden and how odd it feels to see an empty parking lot and locked doors on a Sunday morning. It is odd. It is more than odd. It is painful. It is tragic. Tragically necessary. The Acts of the Apostles describes how the Christians gathered on the first day of the week for breaking bread and for discussion. That’s what Christians have always done. Gather on Sundays for Bible and communion, for Word and Sacrament.

So if my relationship with Jesus is formed by Word and Sacrament in the life of the community, and there is not much Word and Sacrament and not much coming together of community then where is my relationship with Jesus? Maybe I should have written down that phone number that was written on the sidewalk in chalk.

Christianity from the beginning gathered on Sundays for fellowship, for food, and for reflection on the scriptures. As I said, that’s in the New Testament. But the Jewish concept of sabbath is on the last day of the week, Saturday. And the purpose of the Jewish sabbath is rest. “Sabbath” is a noun that means rest. And while gathering as a synagogue on Saturday is a Jewish practice

as old as the New Testament, the primary purpose of the Jewish sabbath is not study, nor is it gathering together, nor is it singing God's praises. The sabbath is first and foremost about rest, as stated in the Ten Commandments.

Since we halted public worship services last spring, I've often wondered about the presence of God in the Jewish concept of sabbath. I've been taught to look for Christ in one form of sabbath, the busy activity of a Sunday morning overflowing with Word and Sacrament. But for the first time in 28 years, I'm not leading worship and teaching things on Sunday mornings. Sunday mornings are quiet. A walk in the cool morning air. Birdsong. Some music on the radio. Instead of gulping coffee, sipping tea. I've thought of Elijah's story.

And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.

A still small voice.

The Jewish sabbath is first and foremost about rest. Genesis says God rested on the seventh day. And Genesis also says that God made humankind in his image. And so if God takes a day off, we who are his offspring ought also to rest. The all-encompassing idea of the sabbath meant that animals rested. Non-Jews who served Jews rested. Every seventh year, the fields were not plowed. Things must lie dormant. The earth and all of creation must rest and find delight. And in the words of the prophets, the sabbath is a time to set aside rapacious economic anxiety. Listen to Isaiah:

If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

After seven cycles of seven years, there was a super sabbath— the jubilee year— which set slaves free and cancelled debts and lifted property liens. A huge reset of society.

I don't think there is anything good about this coronavirus, but if the shutdown of our social lives and our travels, and the shutdown of our consumerism and our workaholicism— if the slowdown and the pause of our frenzied lives— if these shutdowns forced upon us against our wills— if these shutdowns give us time to think. Room to ponder. Opportunities to re-connect. Then maybe out of this tragedy we can gain some humanity. Some wisdom. And even some community.

For a church like us, for a pastor like me, we are truly deprived when we cannot gather together as community around Word and Sacrament, nourished by Word and Sacrament, sent by Word

and Sacrament. We are truly deprived. But the Hebrew Bible– the Old Testament– has a different understanding of sabbath. Of rest. Getting off the treadmill. You. Me. The animals, the fields, the whole creation. And perhaps in these hours of boredom and impatience and cabin fever perhaps the concept of sabbath makes an opportunity to renew our relationship with God, and the rhythms of creation and humanity as he originally created them.

Would you like to have a deeper relationship with God? I didn't write down that phone number that was written in chalk on the sidewalk. But I can point you to a concept that's as simple and as old as the Ten Commandments.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus invites us to take his yoke upon our shoulders. Everybody is yoked or burdened by something. Jesus says that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. That's what he says today. "I am gentle and humble in heart." Words that feel like a wave of cool water. To anyone living in a society where no one is gentle, and no one is humble. Jesus said at the outset of our gospel reading: "To what will I compare this generation?" Jesus, you may be Lord and Master and Savior, but I really wish you'd visit this generation and let me know if your generation was so much worse. "To what will I compare this generation?"

Jesus is gentle and humble in heart. Would you like to have a personal relationship with someone who is gentle and humble in heart? Because he's offering rest for our weary souls. 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. Amen.