

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 9C
Romans 7:15-25a
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

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First Immanuel Lutheran Church
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This has been a week for pausing. Pausing reopening efforts because virus infection rates are rising too fast. Pausing for a national holiday and reflecting on where our country stands today. We have been needing a pause, for the sake of everyone's health.

And today's scriptures call us to a spiritual pause as well. This Sunday is our Christian sabbath, set aside each week for worship. It is a regular pause when we rest in God's presence and receive strength for our journey as disciples. Especially today, as Jesus speaks this beautiful invitation: *Come to me, all you that are weary and 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.*

We cherish these words, and if you're like me you might puzzle over them a bit too. Is following Jesus supposed to be *restful*? Isn't there always something more to do? Feed somebody, or help them somehow, or charge forward in the cause of justice? Yes, our calling as Christ's followers is urgent --- but we are human too. And our Lord calls us to wholeness of life, abundance of life, even as we dedicate ourselves to serving God and others.

At our house we're big fans of a Netflix series called *Queer Eye*. It's essentially a makeover show where five designers help someone gain greater health through counseling, food, grooming, fashion, and fixing up their home. It's a show with a lot of heart.

One recent episode is called *The Anxious Activist*. It focuses on Abby, an 18-year-old climate change activist in Philadelphia. Abby is as sincere and passionate and dedicated as a young adult can be. She has put off college to live in a communal house with other activists. She spends pretty much every waking minute organizing and advocating, and she feels like there's always more to do – because the fate of the planet is at stake. But Abby often struggles with anxiety. She doesn't eat well or sleep well, she doesn't make any time at all for friends and fun. The designers teach her to cook delicious food and make time to recharge and enjoy friendship. Because if Abby lets herself burn out, the work she cares about so much, might not get done. So Abby learns a new motto: *I am enough, and there is enough time*. She commits to taking deep breaths, slowing down,

and investing her energy more wisely, so she can stay engaged for the long run in this important cause.

Looking at someone else's life, we can see what may be true for us too. This congregation is full of sincere, hardworking, dedicated people. We love God, love our families, and love this world. We are doers, and we sincerely want to be a force for good. But these days our circuits can get humming so fast we become overwhelmed. My friends, we are living through a pandemic. This is what a counselor has called "a period of prolonged distress." In this incredible time, we each face our own challenges, whether it be loneliness or financial stresses or family struggles or job issues or health issues. And even taking in daily news stories can be exhausting and worrisome. Sometimes we have to turn off the TV and radio, put away the phone. One morning not long ago, for the sake of health, I needed to set a definite intention: *Today I commit to not letting myself worry about anything outside my immediate sphere of influence. Just for today I will focus only on what I can personally influence. I will leave the rest to others and to God.*

Our culture rewards overwork and over-worry, even in normal times. But what would it mean to trust in the promise and presence of God, and go about things in Christ's way, accept Christ's age-old invitation:

Come to me, all you that are weary and 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.

In these words we hear the deep and abiding kindness of Jesus. He equipped his disciples with purpose and zeal and courage, yet he also commended gentleness and humility and ease and lightness. Because life in Christ is meant to bring sweetness and relief and refreshment and love. God intends for these good things to permeate our days. In fact, dwelling in God's goodness, resting in divine kindness, is essential for our calling.

I recently tuned into an online training about racial injustice, and I expected it to be pretty intense. But I got a surprise. The trainers made a point of describing justice leaders as "oxygenators of joy and life." Joy and life! They advised that there are times when a leader should stop and ask their group, "Are we taking ourselves too seriously today?" "How can we breathe life into this moment?" That's beautiful. That sounds to me like a call to learn from Jesus, who is *gentle and humble in heart, bringing rest for our souls*. Learn from Jesus, who wisely calls us to celebrate joy and life, especially while we are doing important and difficult work.

Right now, many people do feel an urge to push for racial justice. But a pastor who is also person of color recently observed that misplaced urgency can actually be destructive. When white people barge in to “fix things,” it can make everything worse. He advised that right now is not a time to rush. Instead, this is a time for caring white people to slow down and listen and learn. To rest with the complexity of race and pay attention to the history. It does seem counterintuitive, but we all need rest – in order to gain perspective. And we all need to remember: *we are not God*. We are only God’s friends. Blessed that God has called us friends, and that Jesus leads us into true wisdom.

The wisdom of Jesus is always surprising. In his day, some people were shocked by how Jesus feasted with all the wrong people, eating and drinking and making merry and generally celebrating life and friendship. But Jesus knew—people need celebrations and holidays, people need pauses to relax and be refreshed. People need to take a load off their weary feet, let their guard down, and laugh out loud. People need to set down their burden for a little while. Because we’re human. Jesus knows.

He promises a yoke that is easy and a burden that is light. A yoke is a kind of harness for either a person or animal, it fits over the shoulders and back and makes it possible to pull a heavy load or plow a field. A yoke that fits well is a real gift. That’s what’s meant by an easy yoke. An easy yoke makes hard work doable. It makes it possible to pull the weight.

And this is what Jesus invites us to – a well-fitting yoke. A way of life that we can bear, and more than this, a way of life that brings joy and hope and fulfillment -- even when we are taking on hard work for the sake of love, especially then. Work like raising a family during a pandemic. Reaching out to loved ones far away. Enduring loneliness and distancing for the sake of everyone’s health. Pushing through the fear and uncertainty of financial trouble. Trying to understand the centuries-long wound of racism and help make a new way forward for us all.

It’s surprising but true -- following Jesus brings rest for our souls. We will be thoroughly challenged as we learn to live like him. But we will also be deeply blessed. Blessed through forgiveness, through generosity, through serving our neighbor, through outreaching love. Blessed through trust, through humility, and holy gentleness. Learning from Jesus means we will find the life we were made for, a life of friendship with God and companionship with each other. In following Christ, we discover the life that fits us and brings true satisfaction. We live out the purpose we were born for.

Can we trust that Jesus' calling is good and kind and possible to bear? Today the teacher who is gentle and humble in heart calls to each of us. To take a deep breath. To know God welcomes us. To know we belong. Experience refreshment. Find true rest for our souls.

Thanks be to God. Amen.